Guitar & Bass OCTOBER 2014

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Vol 26 No 01

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Guitar & Bass

PLUS!

Breedlove

Ace Frehley

Lazy J

Billy Sheehan

INTERVIEW

Slash

The Les Paul legend on his new album and the endless joy of guitar playing

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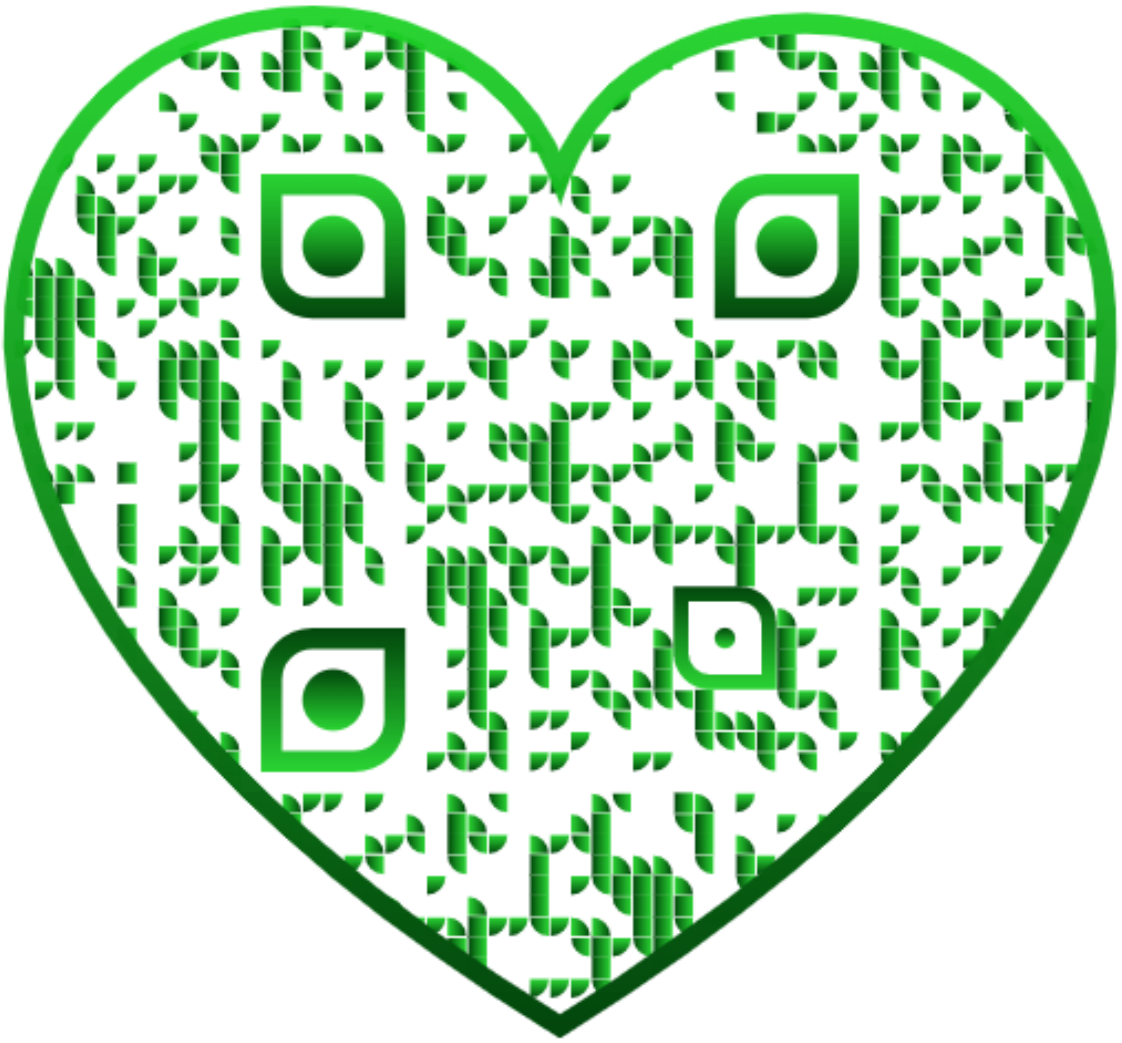
Private Collection

Time capsules from the golden age of rock'n'roll

Fender Relic & PRS SE Bass reviews



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Top Hats and Tales...

There are a number of good reasons to read a Slash interview, and one of the best has to be the sheer enthusiasm the man still has after all these years for absolutely everything guitar-related. This month's cover feature is another fine demonstration of this, and is a must-read for everyone who occasionally questions why they spend so much time playing the guitar.

That's not even close to being all the goodies we have for you this month: hot on the heels of last issue's Relic debate, we review a Fender Relic Stratocaster to ascertain the true cut of its jib. We also go forensic on Keith Richards' famous Gibson Les Paul – one of the most influential instruments of all time for Les Paul lovers in the UK. Inside this issue there's also one of the finest rock'n'roll guitar collections we've ever had the pleasure to behold (we weren't allowed within 100 yards of the guitars for fear our drool would spoil the finishes). For the bass lovers among you, there's a review of the PRS SE: will its release have the same effect as its six-string ancestor? There are also some quality quotations as always from the living bass legend people call Billy Sheehan to get your eyeballs into.

All this and more can be yours by turning over the pages in any order you like. We trust that this – and some trips to www.guitar-bass.net – will satiate your fret-fulled hunger pangs for at least a wee while. Enjoy the issue.

John

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The man in the hat explains why he just wants to play guitar

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Photo: David Wolff - Patrick /Redferns/Getty Images

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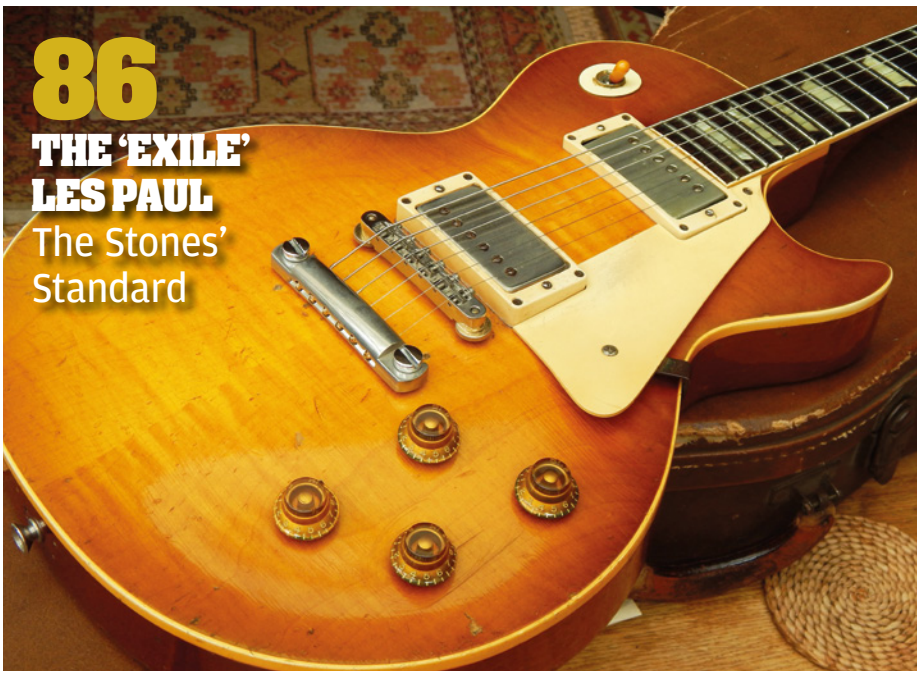

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The Stones' Standard

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Cover photo: Metal Hammer Magazine/Getty Images

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STAR LETTER

RELISHING A RELIC

In the past six months I've taken up both the guitar and your magazine, and both of them are giving me a lot of pleasure! I really enjoyed the article in the September 20 4 issue about relicing – balanced, interesting and informative (embarrassed to say I didn't know what a pre-CBS Strat meant, but I do now). I even recognised myself in there – not by name, of course – but as someone who already has their free bus pass (they give them out early where I live, obviously). I hope my fingers aren't totally crablike! I've already got a small collection of guitars, but I'll be leaving them alone... between me and them, one relic is probably enough. At least I don't have to bash my face with a spoon; nature has already had an enthusiastic go at that. However, I've got no problem with people who want to give relicing a go. I'm still rubbish at playing of course, but not as rubbish as I was last month, and as long as I can keep saying that then I'm going to be happy. So my plan is a few more months of spare bedroom practising, then see if I can find a few more old-timers who are happy playing homage to people like Duane Eddy, the Ventures and the Shadows and then, by the time I fully pack in the day job in one year, seven months and three days (not that I'm counting), actually play in front of some people somewhere... maybe an old folks home. Anyway, I'll let you know how I get on, and perhaps you can publish my tour dates.

Roger Fowles *via email*

G&B **Many thanks to Roger, and everyone else who wrote in on the subject of relics and last month's cover feature. We're going to print a couple now and some more in future issues, to allow writers on other subjects to be covered, but we're grateful to everyone who has taken the time and trouble to contribute on the subject. As for you Roger, we're glad the subject of relics was of interest to relative newcomers. We're looking forward to publishing your tour dates.**

Rosetti

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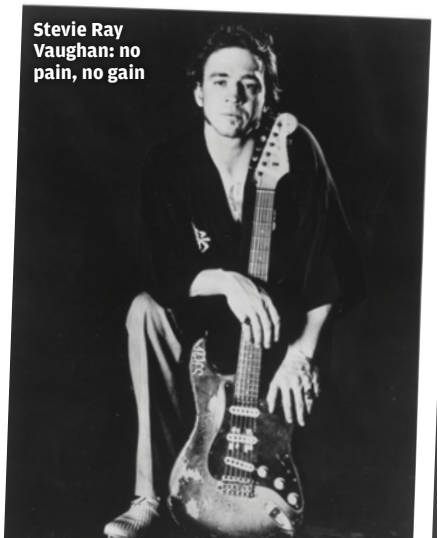
TOP TOUGH TIPS

Reading Kevin Thompson's letter on SRV and what the great man did to strengthen his fingers reminded me of a few years back when I was teaching my son to learn the guitar. Being of somewhat advanced years, the memory of those sore fingers had faded, so I chuckled to myself when he started complaining about the pain on his fingertips, but I convinced him that in a relatively short amount of time it wouldn't hurt at all. The laughs kept coming when the callouses started forming on his fingers and it stopped hurting. He became near-obsessed with those callouses, and the simple desire to keep them (and show them off to his friends and his long-suffering mother) meant that he needed no further incentive to keep practicing. Just thought I pass this on as an alternative method to get beginners motivated to keep going through those tough early stages.

Steve Richmond *via email*


Stevie Ray Vaughan: no pain, no gain

G&B **The relationship between guitarist and callouses is a strange and beautiful thing...**

EXCITING FINISH

I thoroughly enjoyed Huw Price's article on relicing, and thought that I could add a little to the discussion. As a player and tech for many years

I've seen and worked on many true and false vintage guitars, so a couple of things rang bells. A meeting with two of Fender's Master Builders via a friend in Fender Artist Relations let me hear first hand that the very first Fender relic was a bass for Don Was. A friend of mine recently paid a five-figure sum for a vintage Les Paul which had a polyester finish! He was taken in by appearance, paperwork and the fact that it had a tracker chip in it. He lost sight of the big picture and all of his cash! I would agree that many vintage guitars are characterful dogs; my feeling is that there are times for a pedigree Dalmatian, but often a mongrel is more fun. New guitars are more consistent and reliable, and vintage isn't best for most people – but find the right one, and it'll be with you for life.

Finally, relic or not? I love them, because I can now gig my favourite vintage guitars without having a mate to watch over them the whole time. People who care just come up and tell me what a good/bad job someone has done with the relicing, I smile, nod and know that my guitars are back out in the wide world doing what they should, far safer from the semi-educated and their sticky fingers. Long live the art of confusion...

Graham *via email*

JOKING ASIDE

As a guitar player and a fan of the comedian Tim Vine, just thought I'd pass on the guitar-related joke that's been lauded as one of the best of this year's Edinburgh Festival. Here it is: 'This bloke said to me, "I'm going to attack you with the neck of a guitar". I said, "Is that a fret?"' After a good half-an-hour trying to come up with other guitar-related gags, I decided to get on with my work and ask fellow *G&B* readers to see if they can succeed where I failed.

Paul O'Dowd *via email*

G&B **Many thanks, Paul. We're no experts on Tim, but we know he's also a musician, so we don't mind someone having a pop at their own. If you want to take up Paul's joke challenge, please send us your best efforts.**

WINTER FESTIVAL

I know you've recently covered Stevie Ray Vaughan, but you ran an obituary on Johnny Winter in the last issue. It was fine tribute to the man, but I feel he's worthy of a much bigger article. I know this is going to annoy some, but in my opinion, his legacy outweighs even the great SRV. Indeed, I think if he was a bit less reticent in his self-promotion his status as one of the all-time greats wouldn't be in doubt. If you could run a feature worthy of the man that would be great.

Dan Gambi *via email*

G&B **Rest assured we're all Johnny Winter fans here at the mag, and we won't be forgetting him any time soon.**

Johnny Winter: still under-estimated?

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Woke up this mornin'... NEWS

The Gibson RD Artist Returns

Even obscure Gibsons get the reissue treatment these days, and the RD is enjoying a renaissance

First launched in the late '70s, a faltering era for Gibson, the RD survived in the catalogue for five years during its original run. The RD stands for Research & Development and the guitar featured brave innovations; initially it had a Fender-style 25.5" scale length, there were shapely, body-hugging curves, and two of the three models – the Artist and Custom – came packed with innovative onboard active Moog circuitry. It wasn't a massive hit on release, yet the guitar did garner something of a cult following. This reissue is a new take on the RD Artist. Instead of Moog electronics the guitar is driven by two 'groundbreaking' GEM Gibson Active humbuckers which blend PAF-style design with active technology, offering, we're told, unprecedented power, fidelity and sustain. The guitar also carries a Tune-O-Matic bridge, and a TP6 tailpiece which has six small adjustment wheels for accurate fine tuning and is said to improve sustain and allow speedier string-changing. The body is mahogany, as is the neck, which is capped with a 22-fret rosewood fingerboard. It's a bold reissue that does offer something beyond the obvious. Available in Alpine White only. See www.gibson.com for more.

Prison ban on steel string guitars lifted

As part of a 2013 government policy, steel-strung guitars were banned from prisons in November last year. The power of music to help prisoners to rehabilitate has been well-documented, and singer/songwriter Billy Bragg has been responsible for heading a charity that has placed over 350 guitars in prisons – most of which are steel-strung. Dismayed by the decision, Bragg launched a campaign with the help of MP Kevin Brennan to contest the issue and their efforts were rewarded when the ruling was overturned in July. The rehabilitating qualities of the guitar are explained in full by Bragg and co. at www.jailguitardoors.org.

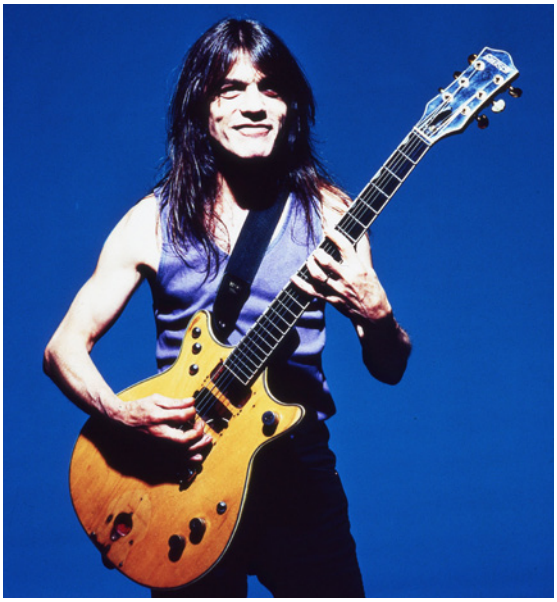
LEEDS BRADFORD GUITAR SHOW

Fast becoming an essential fixture on the guitar aficionado's calendar, the Leeds Bradford Guitar Show is now in its eighth year. Head down to the Pudsey Civic Hall, Dawsons Corner, Pudsey, LS28 5TA (10am to 4pm) on 5 October and you will find more than 70 exhibitors and dealers offering their wares. Workshops and demos will run alongside a live stage which will feature the likes of the Tom Killner Band, Broken Flowers, the Huers and Gav Coulson (must-see virtuoso and delegate of show sponsors JHS). Admission on the door will be paltry £5, and parking is free. Go to www.guitarshows.co.uk for extra info or call 01925 813185.

Routemaster bus and Strat have joint 60th

London's famous old Routemaster double-decker and the Stratocaster both turned 60 this year, and it's telling that the Routemaster has been re-imagined for the 21st century while the Stratocaster has changed little and yet is still utterly contemporary. Transport For London and Fender have combined to run a new Strat-emblazoned Routemaster on London's heritage 24 bus route, which stops at many sites awash with rock history. You could even jump off at Denmark Street and have a blast on a 60th Anniversary Strat...

MALCOLM YOUNG LEAVES AC/DC?



It has been common knowledge that the new AC/DC album, recorded in May, was made without Malcolm Young playing alongside his brother Angus due to a mystery illness. Rumours are now rife that Malcolm may step aside from touring duties, too. The Young brothers' nephew, Stevie, has filled in on rhythm guitar in the studio, and a statement on the band's website reads: 'After 40 years of life dedicated to AC/DC, guitarist and founding member Malcolm Young is taking a break from the band due to ill health. In light of this news, AC/DC asks that Malcolm and his family's privacy be respected during this time. The band will continue to make music.' Sources close to the band insist that Stevie Young is likely be Malcolm's permanent replacement. The current working title for the record is said to be *Man Down*.

BluesFest 2014

In 2013, BluesFest became the first full-scale music festival to rock the Albert Hall. This year the event has been extended to a six-day extravaganza running from 26-31 October. Not all the headliners fit within the demarcation of blues – Elvis Costello, Sheryl Crow and Level 42 may lack juke-joint mojo – but all credit the blues as the starting point of their musical journeys (and should guarantee tickets sales). Robert Cray, Beth Hart, Van Morrison and Gregory Porter have stronger credentials, but the myriad of daytime shows and activities really mark the festival out as a champion of the genre. A £20 stroller ticket gives you access to 15 shows each day in five venues throughout the building. Marcus Bonfanti, Andy Fairweather Low, Mud Morganfield, Babajack and Dr Feelgood will be performing while Learnin' The Blues music workshops, meet & greet sessions and debates on the blues will run through every day. Go to www. bluesfest.co.uk for the full schedule and ticket info.

Calendar SHOWS, GIGS, FESTIVALS, WORKSHOPS

Johnny Marr
13-29 OCTOBER
Now with a smattering of Smiths songs in his set, Marr's legendary jangle will captivate even more
WHERE? **13 stops from Bexhill to Glasgow**
TICKETS **From £24**
CONTACT **www.johnnymarr.com**

An Evening With Roger McGuinn
26-29 SEPTEMBER & 2-11 NOVEMBER
If '60s Byrds jangle is more your bag, Roger returns, no doubt with a 12-string Ricky in tow
WHERE? **Nine dates across the country**
TICKETS **From £29.10**
CONTACT **www.ticketmaster.co.uk**

Ed Sheeran
3-31 OCTOBER
The foremost of a new breed of funky acoustic-minded singer-songwriters, Sheeran and his dinky short-scale Martin are now packing megadomes
WHERE? **20 gigs taking in an arena near you**
TICKETS **From £35.50**
CONTACT **www.edsheeran.com**

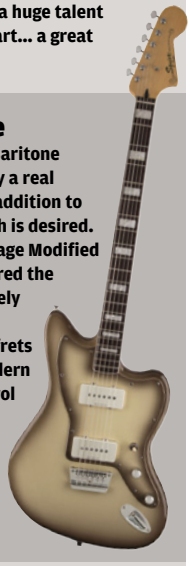
John Mayall 80th Anniversary Tour
16 OCTOBER - 26 NOVEMBER
By the time John Mayall finishes this mammoth tour he will be about to turn 81. We'll have a pint of what he's on and get in the queue
WHERE? **36 shows, just about everywhere**
TICKETS **From £23.50**
CONTACT **www.johnmayall.com**

Kenny Wayne Shepherd
25 OCTOBER - 1 NOVEMBER
Playing from his new collection of blues classics *Goin' Home*, KWS with Brit Laurence Jones opening makes for a joyful night of blues-rock frettery
WHERE? **Six gigs from Edinburgh down to Crawley**
TICKETS **From £22.50**
CONTACT **www.kennywayneshepherd.net**

NEWS IN BRIEF

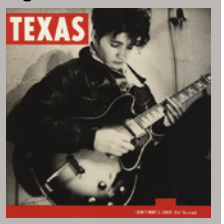
Dick Wagner 1942-2014
Best known for his guitar work and songwriting with Alice Cooper, Michigan-born Dick Wagner has died at the age of 71. He fronted his own bands The Frost and Ursa Major (the latter featuring Billy Joel on keyboards) before he was recruited to play on Cooper's *Schools Out* album. He contributed to follow-ups *Billion Dollar Babies* and *Muscle Of Love*, graduating to co-write with Cooper from the 1975 album *Welcome To My Nightmare* onwards. Wagner went on to record with Lou Reed on the *Berlin* LP and can also be heard on live albums *Rock'n'Roll Animal* and *Lou Reed Live*. Kiss, Peter Gabriel and Meatloaf also benefited from his talents, and Paul Stanley described Wagner as 'a huge talent with a huge tone and huge heart... a great unsung hero'.

Jazzmaster Baritone
The Squier Vintage Modified Baritone Jazzmaster Antigua is not only a real eye-catcher but also a useful addition to your arsenal when extra punch is desired. Squier already offers the Vintage Modified Bass VI Guitar, but we're assured the Baritone is aimed more squarely at regular six-stringers. The rosewood fingerboard has 21 frets which sit on a neck with a modern 'C' profile giving you full control of the whopping 30" scale length. Duncan Designed JM-101N and JM-101B soapbars provide the tone. The RRP is £394.80; see www.fender.com/squier for info.



Epiphone make playing easy
It's claimed that the new PRO-1 collection of acoustics from Epiphone make learning to play the guitar easier than ever before. Epiphone listened to beginners' feedback pertaining to the likes of painful fingertips, unstable tuning and guitars that take too long to break in and reckon they have somehow eased these woes without any hike in price. There are four models; a classical, a dreadnaught, the Plus – featuring a solid spruce top – and the Ultra, with Shadow electronics. Street prices should start from as little as £99.

Texas man in lost 335 appeal
Ally McErlaine, guitarist with the bands Texas and Red Sky July, is appealing for help to find his lost sunburst mid-'70s Gibson ES-335. Ally joined Texas aged 17 in 1988 and played the 335 on every album and tour with the band. You can see him with it on the cover of the 1989 Texas hit single *I Don't Want A Lover* (below). The guitar has a coil tap switch on the lower horn and locking machineheads. It went missing backstage at a charity concert in Battersea Park in 2012; Ally had hoped it would be returned, but is now becoming desperate. If you can help in any way, contact info@republicmedia.net.



Album reviews

Paul Gilbert
STONE PUSHING UPHILL MAN
Music Theories Recordings

You Greek mythology fans will be no doubt familiar with Sisyphus' daily struggles with a large rock. It's an analogy Racer X and Mr Big guitar man Gilbert feels is apt when describing his relationship with his instrument, and on this CD

Gilbert's goal is to make his guitar 'sing' like his favourite vocalists. The tracklisting, consisting of originals and some eclectic covers, makes a fine, toneful effort.

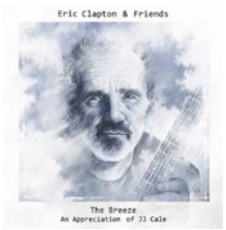
Joanne Shaw Taylor
THE DIRTY TRUTH
Axehouse

Eschewing the plaudits and sales of her recent albums, young Brummie blues star Taylor decamped to Memphis with producer Jim Gaines in an effort to capture the stripped-down sonics of her debut LP. It's an overwhelming triumph.

Taylor's vocals and guitar-playing are a celestial pairing, brimming with emotion and vitality. and the songs really benefit from the more earthy treatment.

Eric Clapton & Friends
THE BREEZE: AN APPRECIATION OF JJ CALE
Surfdog/Polydor

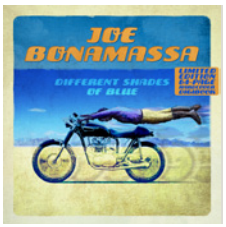
Clapton celebrates the work of his friend and collaborator with the great and the good turning up to pay their respects alongside him. Mark Knopfler, Willie Nelson, John Mayer, Albert Lee... the list goes on, and emphasises just how highly



regarded Cale was by his peers, also bearing witness to just how criminally neglected he was by the public at large. A loving eulogy for a modest man with a major talent.

Joe Bonamassa
DIFFERENT SHADES OF BLUE
Provogue

The first JB album of solely original material is still rooted in blues but reaches further stylistically than its forebears, hitting its mark with graceful swagger. Virtuosity takes a supporting role to a broader sonic palette and a looser, off-the-cuff feel. Towering



riffage is given space to dominate within the confines of *Oh Beautiful* and *Never Give All Your Heart,* while the simple insistent drive of *Living On The Moon* draws you in and keeps you locked.

Chuck Prophet
NIGHT SURFER
Yep Roc

If you filtered Mott The Hoople through some Stonesy swing and topped with seasoned post-punk vitriol you might end up with *Night Surfer*'s sound, and the ex-Green On Red frontman's 12th solo album is packed with articulate wit and the kind of

grandiose melodic skill that has made him a cult hero. REM's Peter Buck adds some jangle to Prophet's own cultured fretwork; this is an original voice on biting, imperious form.

Royal Blood
ROYAL BLOOD
Warner Bros

The bombastic Brighton duo are ripping up the rulebook with a sound that comes on like Jack White channelling Queens Of The Stone Age. The twist is that all that colossal riffage emerges from a budget Gretsch short-scale bass said to be strung

with a guitar string or two. Frontman Mike Kerr is cagey about his rig but his signal certainly splits into both bass and guitar amps, and his thunder demands attention.

Flying Colors
SECOND NATURE
Music Theories Recordings

When this musical supergroup first came together in 2012 the mission was to create sophisticated music that was accessible to all, and it's more of the same from Steve Morse and the rest of the gang. Morse's technical chops and melodic ideas

on tracks such as the *Open Up Your Eyes* add much to the soaring melody, while songs like the folky *One Last Forever* have a rhythmic power you can easily bop to.

Mr Big
THE STORIES WE COULD TELL
Frontiers Music

The hard-rocking veterans return for an eighth album with renewed vim and vigour among the original lineup. Paul Gilbert and Billy Sheehan are in perfect string-driven harmony as the band dish out raw, grooving cuts with an unashamedly '70s

hue. With the awful news of Pat Torpey being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, this may well be the last time you hear classic Mr Big on record – so savour it.

The Stanley Clarke Band
UP
Mack Avenue

After the more acoustic bass-orientated vibe of recent releases, this time around Clarke divides his time roughly equally between electric and acoustic duties – and the world's a better place for this suitably-titled album, as the life-affirming

strains of the funkified *Pop Vigil* sit nicely alongside the melodic power of *Gotham City*. There's even a vital revisiting of his signature tune *School Days* to wow us all.

SNAP JUDGEMENTS

Lucinda Williams
DOWN WHERE THE SPIRIT MEETS BONE
Highway 20
Bill Frisell and Tony Joe White guest on a double album that delights with life-affirming, cathartic country soul, all steeped in gravitas

She Keeps Bees
EIGHT HOUSES
BB*Island
The achingly poignant sound of this raw stripped-down guitar/drums duo garners a demurely lush sheen and is all the more seductively potent for it

Preachers Son
10 STORIES TALL
Preachers Son
A simmering pop-rock, folk, glam hybrid with heavy pentatonics and a fiery pulpit delivery. Warren Huart's genre busting concoction is an intoxicating brew

Status Quo
THE FRANTIC FOUR'S FINAL FLING
Abbey Road/Universal
Dig out the denim and party like it's 1975. The original line-up remind us why it's impossible not to love the Quo. CD comes with DVD/BluRay

Richie Kotzen
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Loud & Proud
Two new tracks mix it with choice cuts from Kotzen's 18 bountiful solo albums, acoustic performances, bootlegs and videos in a neat 2 CD + 1 DVD set

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Blaze OF Glory

If you've being doing something pretty much full-on for 30 years or so, you'd be forgiven if you wanted to kick back a little and enjoy the scenery. Not so Slash; neither the successes nor excesses of his time with Guns N'Roses and Velvet Revolver have diminished his desire to play shows or make records. The imminent release of his latest album, *World On Fire*, show the man christened Saul Hudson hasn't lost any of his six-string mojo. Ably assisted by The Conspirators and Alter Bridge vocalist Myles Kennedy, Slash dishes out a smorgasbord of life-affirming solos alongside plenty of rockin' riffage with aplomb and vigour. **Richard Aldhous** investigates... ↦

Photo: David Wolff-Patrick/Redferns/Getty Images

Photo: Metal Hammer Magazine / Getty Images

Life of Slash: 10 guitars lined up and ready to go

Photo: Richard Ecclestone/Redferns/Getty Images

Having endured more than his fair share of intra-band strife during his time, Slash knows that it doesn't necessarily harm the quality of the music. This time around, however, the man and his fellow musicians were all pulling in the same direction.

'From the first week that we worked together there was an instantaneous likeness of mind, and we just had a blast this whole time,' Slash declares with an approving smile. 'Going into the studio there was none of the sort of frivolous bullshit that a lot of people experience when they're trying to work with pressures of, I don't know... trying to come up with something, or create something. So we just go in there and have a blast and we work really hard and we enjoy each other's company – and it just happens.

'In most bands there's always "one guy", you know,' he adds – although he won't divulge any names when pushed. 'So I think I appreciate a lot that it's finally come full circle for me, where I can... I hadn't planned on putting this band together. It wasn't something I'd set out to do, and it just sort of fell in my lap. It's sort of a blessing because I needed it: I'd had such friction in some things that I was doing before.'

Slash isn't one for walking into a studio completely unprepared, as the vast majority of *World On Fire* was written while on tour. It obviously works for him, as he declares he's going to start writing again on the forthcoming tour.

'I was watching this Eagles movie that they put out recently. With the *Hotel California* record, which was a massive success, they went out on tour and had – as most successful bands do – this whole period of excess when touring, it's all fun and games. And then you start to hate each other by the end, and then all of a sudden you're in the studio and no one's written anything and that's an awful feeling,' he laughs.

'I'm no expert on what a lot of other people do, but I just carry my guitar and just play all the time, and if I have an idea then I record it. These days I don't pressure myself into feeling like I need to write. And because I don't have a deadline, especially because I'm on the road, I'm not thinking about the be-all and end-all goal down the road. So it's very casual, and then at the end of the tour you realise you've got 80 riffs that you can go through!'

When asked to name specific places and people that have inspired the riffs on the latest record, Slash replies that the nomadic nature of touring, and life on the tourbus and hotel room, can make it difficult to pinpoint where things comes. 'I'll tell you that one song, though, was influenced by Rory Gallagher,' he reveals, although impishly fails to name the song. 'It's like my homage to him. I wrote that one on my couch!'

With the amount of live dates he's got planned for the foreseeable future, Slash isn't going to be able to enjoy the pleasures of sitting around the house for a while. So what about the infamous negative aspects of touring?

'The thing I like to do the most is play guitar, to have a gig lined up where I can do that'

'People go on about the stresses of the road, but the most rewarding thing about my life is that I can play music,' he points out. 'The thing I literally like to do the most is play guitar – to have a gig lined up where I can do that. I'm blessed that I'm pretty much in control of my destiny at this point, so I love to pick and choose what I want to do.

'The one possible downside to touring, especially when you're doing stadium gigs, is that the identity of every city you play in can get diminished in your mind. Not the music, or the people who graciously come along to share in this thing, but you can get to where you don't really know where you are. I'm not talking about what day of the week here; I'm a musician, I don't give a fuck what day of the week it is! But I try more these days to get a sense of my bearings – some places are easy to remember – and big destinations.

'And people can be kind enough to let you know how much they enjoyed a particular gig. For example, ➔

Slash on stage in Hong Kong, 2011

Photo: EDd Jones/AFP/Getty Images

when Guns N'Roses played Ireland back in 1992. Knowing that people had a great time makes it more memorable for me, for sure. Otherwise, what's the point?'

Despite being one of the most recognisable musicians on earth for decades, any mention of fame gets Slash openly grimacing about his distaste for the whole notion. He's quick to point that these days, when he's not playing, he keeps as low a profile as possible... and he's at pains to ensure that no one gets the wrong impression of him as a moaning rock star.

'In Los Angeles there are a lot of places where you know you're gonna get attention, because people are looking for you, so you can avoid those places if you want,' he says. 'But it can happen randomly anywhere on occasion when I'm not expecting it, and it'll catch me off guard. I don't have the personality for it – I'm not that guy.

'But I do love the fact that anybody would give a shit about whatever it is what I do. And I love that people recognise that I make records, or that I can play guitar and people would listen to it. I'm a workaholic and I've got a million things I want to do. I'd rather people focus on that rather than what club I went to.'

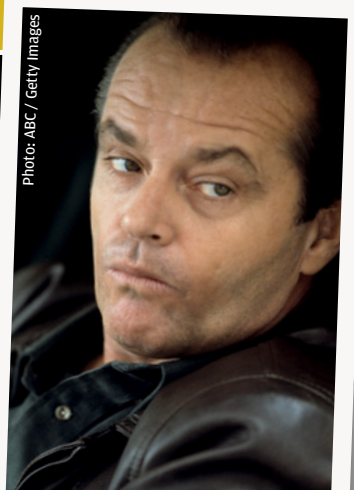
A knowing smile appears when the subject of Guns N'Roses is brought up, rather than any sense of hostility. However, he brings the subject to a quick close by revealing that this lack of ire wasn't always the case. 'The biggest rumour that went around that really made me react was the one where Guns N'Roses were reforming and all that BS – any other rumours about me never really stuck in my mind, so it can't have bothered me that much. But with the Guns N'Roses reunion? I wrote a book in response to that one,' he laughs, referring to his best-selling 2007 autobiography.

One subject he's happy to riff about however is the 'shamefully uncool' parts of his record collection. Diehard Slash fans who feel he's the living saviour of rock'n'roll might want to look away at this point...

'I have the entire Warner Brothers cartoon catalogue soundtrack of everything they ever did, everything Leon Schlesinger [Warner Bros producer] did. And there's other stuff, like *Fantasia* ➔➔

Slash's hero

Ask Slash about his true hero, and you won't get a guitar player – or any musician at all. 'I do have a lot of people who've inspired me, but if you're asking me to name one, it's probably got to be Jack Nicholson.' And the reasons why the legendary actor still gets top-billing in Slash's estimation? 'I always fall on him, because he's someone I've always respected and admired, and he really is a great rock'n'roll icon!' replies Slash. 'He's a great actor, and hell, he's Jack Nicholson – he's always got a great party atmosphere going on, wherever he is. Jack's got a great rebellious personality, which unlike what you get with a lot of stars isn't a façade. That man is genuine.'



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Slash with sparring partner Axl Rose in Rio de Janeiro, 1991

Photo: Ke.Mazur/WireImage/Getty Images

and all that kind of shit. But those are all brilliant works, so it's not necessarily uncool. I'd say the most uncool thing that I do is watch *The Irregular Show* – that's a cartoon – when my kids aren't around. But as far as records go, I don't have a problem with liking stuff other people don't, or buying records that would make other people surprised. I have one Kanye West record – it has that song *Stronger* on it he did with Daft Punk. That riff is great, and I bought the whole record because of that one song, because I'm old-school.

'I go wherever I need to with music to get the right feeling and the feeling right. Music makes me emotional. It always has, more so than anything – other than occasional movie. Obviously, my wife and family mean the most, but I tend to be very even-keeled in the midst of controversial situations with people who are reacting a lot more than I am. But I can be in the middle of something like that and be okay, but – whether I'm listening to or playing music – I'll be a lot more responsive emotionally.

'Maybe it comes from growing up in an artistic family. We didn't know anything about money then, and no-one in my family really cares now. We've always been of the mentality that the art was always the most important thing, and then you thought about how you could make ends meet. I had no aspirations of any kind of financial success, and when I finally did have it, I didn't know what to do with it. What money I do make is all about taking care of the kids and my wife. If I didn't have that kind of focus for money, and that kind of home life to ground me, I would just be living in hotels, concentrating on getting to the next gig and not giving a shit about anything else.'

As the call for 'final question' comes, all this positive talk regarding the life-affirming power of guitar-playing, creating and gigging, it seems at odds from a quote in an interview where Slash declared that 'music is the worst thing you could get into'...

> *'It's a hell of a crapshoot to get into music. The business can mess you up and chew you out'*

'What I meant there was that it's a hell of a crapshoot to get into music, for a business perspective, if you have any monetary aspirations,' he explains. 'When I started out I just wanted to play guitar and be in a band – that was pretty much the long and the short of it. The music business never really intimidated me, because I didn't have big rock star dreams, but it can mess you up and chew you out if you have those dreams. So if I was talking to a kid now about the music business, I would try and dissuade them.

'It's so messed up now. If you really wanna go the whole way, the odds of being able to succeed at that in the long term are 10 times worse that how it was when I started. However, if you wanna learn how to play an instrument, then that's a great reason. I'd never tell a kid not to play – it's the best thing in the world.'

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MUSIC IS OUR PASSION

Photo: Jayme Thornton

Space *is the Place*

Ace Frehley, original Kiss man and one of rock's most iconic guitarists, is happy, healthy, inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and, as he tells **Matt Lamy**, in orbit with his new album *Space Invader*...

To most of the world, Ace Frehley is the spaceman guy who shoots rockets out the end of his guitar in that band with make-up. To Kiss fans he's either the historically unreliable, alcoholically-challenged original lead guitarist, or a much maligned, estranged-but-irreplaceable component of the creative force that started one of the world's biggest bands. The reality, hearing his distinctive New York twang cackle and crackle down the transatlantic phone line, is that in 2014 he's a solo artist in possibly the best shape of his life.

'I got engaged to a great gal called Rachael Gordon five years ago,' Ace says. 'We're very much in love, it's making me a better man. I'm coming up on eight years sober, and I think that's one of the reasons my vocals are so strong, because I'm a lot healthier. I'm feeling more focused, I'm feeling more dynamic, and I'm feeling, hey, I'm getting older, if I'm going to do certain things, I'd better get them done soon.'

Last year Frehley published his autobiography, *No Regrets,* and now he's just released *Space Invader,* a new album of original recordings. It's been five years since Space Ace's last record, *Anomaly,* reached #27 on the US Billboard charts – but for a man who only released three new records in the preceding 30 years, that's pretty good going.

'*Space Invader* took about 10 months to record,' Ace says. 'I record with the least amount of people in the studio, and all the songs were tracked with just me on rhythm guitar and Matt Starr on drums. It's an easy way to work because less things can go wrong if you have just two people recording. Once I get a great drum track I throw on a scratch bass track, and then I'll start overdubbing ideas.'

While we've all heard stories about rock stars having people to do certain mundane chores for them, in a typically Ace way, his is a little unconventional. 'On the title track, there's a wah wah solo in there. But it's actually my engineer Alex Salzman playing the wah pedal while I play the guitar. It's tough for me these days to coordinate playing a wah and trying to figure out a solo that I haven't worked out yet. So it's easier to get somebody else to play the pedal, and I'll just figure out what notes I'm playing,' he grins.

'But one trick I've used on all my records, even my 1978 Kiss solo album, is to back up all the guitar tracks with acoustic guitars. That's a technique I learned from Pete Townshend. If you listen to old the Who records, a lot of the electric guitar tracks have acoustic guitars under them, supporting them.

'So I'm very happy with the album – it actually turned out better than I anticipated. It's always a big thrill when you come out with a new record.

Gear

Guitars

A range of Gibson Les Pauls including Ace Frehley Custom Shop signature models; Fender Stratocasters and Telecasters; Taylor, Gibson and Guild acoustics

Amps

Marshall 900 Series 100W amps through 4x12" cabinets with old Celestion 25W speakers, tweed 1950s Fender Harvard and Princeton amps, vintage Vox with two 10" Bulldog speakers

Effects

Electro-Harmonix Big Muff, Dunlop CryBaby wah, pickup-mounted smoke bomb, neck-attached rocket launcher, flashing guitar body

Right now I'm really excited to see how the fans react, because I think I've given the fans everything they want with this record. There are elements from my 1978 solo record in there, and elements from Frehley's Comet and the Ace Frehley band. I'm playing a lot of guitar and I'm playing heavier songs, which is what everybody asked me to do. So I'm really hoping that the fans are going to receive this album well.'

One particularly ingredient of *Space Invader* which matches his previous albums – with the notable exception of 1988's *Second Sighting* – is the inclusion of a famous cover version, in this case the Steve Miller Band's *The Joker*.

'Doing a cover to give your own perspective on a song is a nice way to round off an album,' Ace says. 'When I think back to my Kiss solo album in 1978, Eddie Kramer's assistant came up with the idea to do *New York Groove*. I was resistant to the idea, but it turned out to be my biggest hit. On this record Ken Gulick from eOne Records came up with the idea for me to do *The Joker*. I wasn't thrilled with the idea, but I figured, let me give it a shot and maybe take somebody else's suggestions once in a while, and it turned out really good.

'On Anomaly I did *Fox On The Run* by the Sweet. I was a fan of the Sweet – I thought they were a great band. They had everything that a strong rock band needs, but they weren't as big in the US as they should have been.

'Even on *Trouble Walkin'* in 1989 I covered *Hide Your Heart*, which was written by Paul Stanley, Desmond Child and Holly Knight. I can't remember who came up with the idea to do that, but I got hold of that song and decided to do a remake of it. I remember, after recording it I got a call from Gene Simmons, saying: "Hey, will you take that off your record because we're going to release it as our first single?" I had to say, sorry, I've already spent a lot of money recording it and producing it and mixing it. And I was happy the way mine turned out!

'I've decided my next record will be a full album of covers and remakes. I really don't want to give too much away, but I've tracked a Stones song, and I tried doing *Space Cowboy* by Deep Purple – that came off pretty good. I'm probably going to track 20 songs and end up using half of them.'

No matter what else happens in his life, Frehley will always be connected with two distinctive shapes – the lightning bolt, and the Les Paul. But his guitar locker isn't stocked solely with single-cutaway Gibsons.

'Obviously I used a lot of Les Pauls recording *Space Invader*, but I used a lot of Fenders too,' Ace says. 'I have about half a dozen Strats and half a dozen Telecasters. I double a lot of my rhythm tracks with those. Fenders have a different harmonic range to a Les Paul and they can thicken up a song really well. They can provide what's lacking in a Les Paul track. And in terms of acoustics I use Taylors, Gibsons and Guilds. It all just comes together nicely.

'My first guitar was bought for me by my dad. It was some Japanese guitar, a Kent or something. By the time I auditioned for Kiss I had a single-pickup reverse Firebird. I had seen Eric Clapton playing that on the ➔

'I'm playing a lot of guitar and writing heavier songs, which everybody asked me to do'

Ace the fan

Ace might be among the elder statesmen of world-famous guitarists, but that doesn't stop him still being a music enthusiast at heart.

'I was doing autograph signings a few months back and I bumped into Keith Emerson,' he says. 'That was a real treat because I was big fan of Emerson, Lake and Palmer. I remember seeing them at the Filmore East when I was a teenager.

'And I bumped into Kris Kristofferson last year here in San Diego. Rachael took me to one of his concerts and we went backstage and he was very gracious. He's a great songwriter. He got up on stage with just an acoustic guitar and belted it out all night. He's got to be in his 70s – I was very impressed.'

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ACE FREHLEY
Ace Frehley (1978)
When the four Kiss members all released solo albums at the same time, it was a surprise that Frehley's fared best. Stand-out track is Ace's superb cover of *New York Groove*

ACE FREHLEY
Space Invader (2014)
Frehley's newest album has ingredients gathered from throughout his career – the guitar work on songs such as *Gimme A Feeling*, *Toys*, and *What Every Girl Wants* could be classic Kiss

And another thing...

Two of the musician's who played on Ace's 1978 solo album, drummer Anton Fig and bassist Will Lee, are members of talk show host David Letterman's regular house band

Ace with signature three-pickup Les Paul: 'It's such a well rounded guitar. It never lets you down'

Farewell Cream Tour and at Madison Square Garden, so I scoured all the pawn shops in New York City until I found one, I played that for quite a while.

'I switched to a Les Paul simply because it's such a well-rounded guitar, it never lets you down and has the sustain a rock guitarist wants and needs.'

Such is his connection with Les Pauls that Ace Frehley signature models are among Gibson's most well-received products. Earlier this year a new Spaceman 'Budokan' Les Paul was released, to typical public relish. 'I thought that turned out great,' Ace says. 'It sold out before it was even out the door. I was talking to the president of Gibson's Custom Shop while I was down there signing the guitars and I said, so, how are sales? He said: "What do you mean how are sales? They're already sold and we haven't even shipped them yet." Now we're trying to figure out what's going to be the next Ace guitar reissue. I'm toying between my first Les Paul Standard or my black triple pickup Custom that I used for many years in the '70s and '80s.'

For somebody whose off-stage life has at times been little more than shambolic, it's surprising to hear Ace has never had any major disaster with his six-string possessions. 'I've been pretty lucky... none of my prized guitars have been stolen or broken. When I was at Gibson I bumped into Peter Frampton and he told me the story about how he lost his black Custom Les Paul – he was actually there to retrieve it when we met. But I've been really lucky. On my last European tour I dropped one of my signature Les Pauls and the headstock cracked off, but my roadie glued it back on and it plays as good as ever.'

Hitting the road is next on the agenda. 'Right now we're scheduling some shows in the US in the fall, and if the record takes off in Europe and Australia and Japan, we'll visit there as well. I'm hoping to come back to England – there are great fans over there.

'Next year I'll start working on my covers album, and I also have a couple of movie scores that I might get involved with. That'll be a departure for me, and it's something I've always wanted to do. I'd also like to do a computer animation and score it. And I started writing my second book a while back. We have a few chapters done, and a couple of outlines – hopefully we'll get that out next year. So there's a lot of things I'd like to do that I haven't done, but which I believe I will accomplish.

'Somebody said to me recently: "Ace, out of all the guitar players in the world, you're the one who is cited the most as an influence from a lot major stars." I was surprised to hear that, but it's a big compliment and I'm very flattered. I never took a lesson, I just got up there and copied all my heroes – Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix, Pete Townshend – and somehow came up with my own style. And even now, 40 years after Kiss started, I feel there are still a lot of good things on the horizon.'

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

In April this year, 15 years after they first became eligible, Kiss were finally inducted by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. But only the four original members – Ace, Peter Criss, Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley – were included in the ceremony, which made for a slightly fraught experience.

'I thought it went pretty well. Everyone was pretty civil to each other,' Ace says. 'My biggest regret was that I didn't perform. Me and Peter were all up for performing – the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame asked us four original members who were being inducted to play – but Paul and Gene declined. After 40 years you'd think they'd give the fans 10 or 15 minutes, but they never really told me why they didn't want to do it.

'But I was very happy to be there. After we did our presentation speeches we went backstage and I did press interviews for a good while. Paul and Gene kind of ran out the back door, and then Peter left as well. There was a multitude of international press there, and they missed out – I never understood that either.'

(Actual size)

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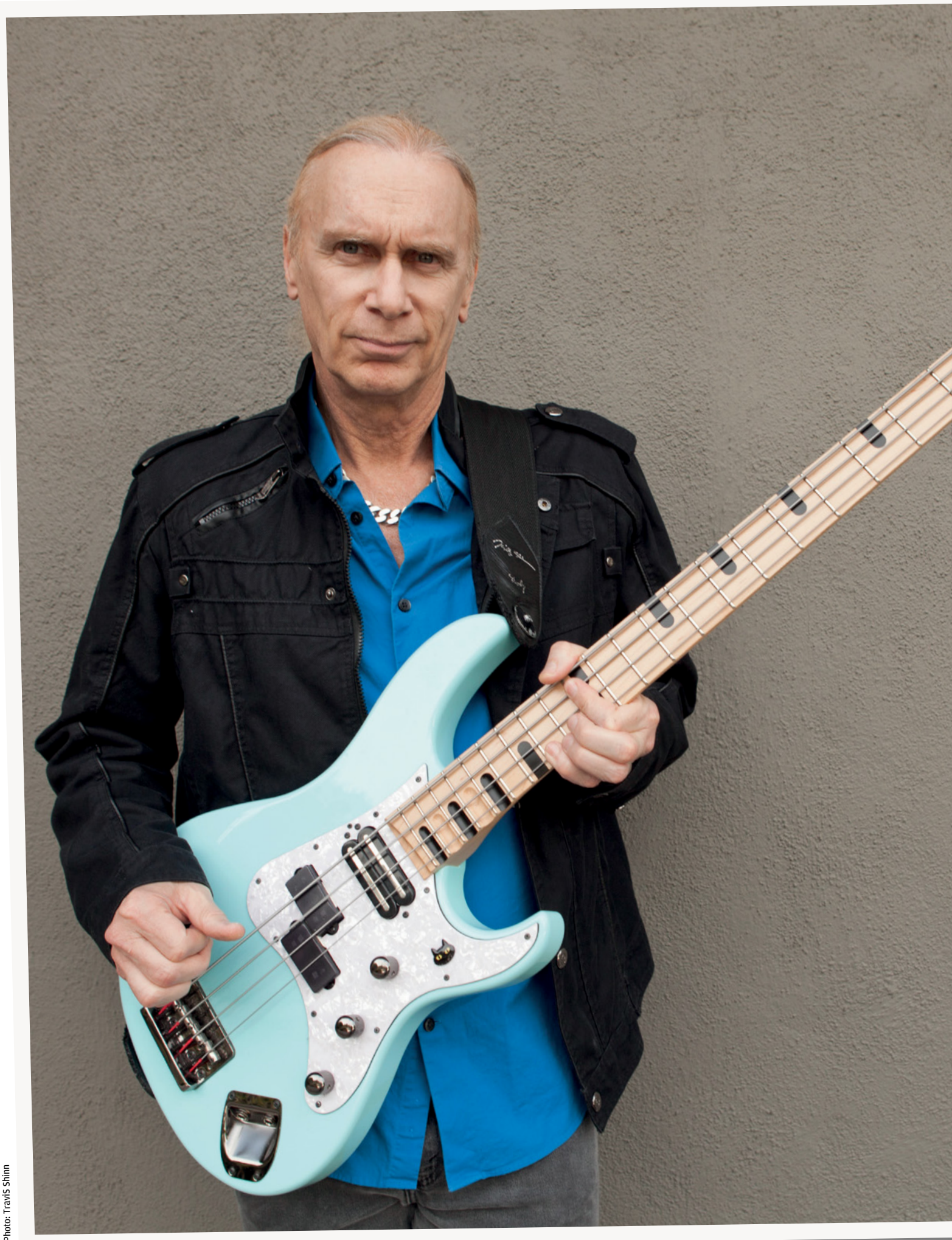

Photo: Travis Shinn

Off The Leash

Powerhouse trio the Winery Dogs gives the perfect platform to witness the bass mastery of Billy Sheehan. **Michael Heatley** catches up with a busy man...

A flying visit to Sonisphere in July gave us a teasing taste of Billy Sheehan's latest band, the Winery Dogs. A classic rock outfit in power-trio format, it gives the multi-faceted bassman another outfit to add to a star-studded CV that already encompasses Talas, David Lee Roth, Steve Vai, Mr Big, Michael Schenker, bass trio Bx3 (with Jeff Berlin and Stu Hamm) and jazz-rockers Niacin.

The last thing he needed, having come off stage at Knebworth 'hot, sweaty and without coffee or food or sleep for 24 hours', was a *Guitar & Bass* interviewer in his face, but the professionalism that's made him the iconic figure he is saw Sheehan through.

Amazingly this was the band's first ever festival, but the potential equipment problems of playing such one-off occasions had barely registered. 'It was okay,' he smiles. 'We don't fly with much, and only the front end of the gear is mine. We had no line check, no nothing – we just had to run up there. But we have a great crew who had it very together.'

The Winery Dogs is very much a meeting of kindred spirits. He'd played with Mike Portnoy, best known as drummer with Dream Theater, in Amazing Journey, a 2006 Who tribute tour in America which had also involved former Mr Big guitar pal Paul Gilbert. And when the initial trio with Whitesnake/Thin Lizzy man John Sykes failed to take off, a little bit of history repeated itself. Richie Kotzen, best known for an earlier stint in Poison, had replaced Gilbert in Mr Big during a 1999-2002 hiatus. He filled the vacant frontman role and helped get the show out of the kennel and onto the road.

The Winery Dogs have just followed up their eponymous debut album, released last year, with the live *Unleashed In Japan*. So how has the studio material translated to the stage?

'Since the record was done very live to start with,' Billy explains, 'playing it live wasn't a huge jump for us. The cool thing is that we do a lot of improvising – we use the basis of the [studio] record as our foundation. Some people have come and seen us 20 or more times at different shows. We recognise them in the crowd. They always say to us they are pleased to see the changes. We never lose the essence of the song. The song is always there, the foundation is there, but the parts we improvise keep it alive, keep it growing. We do that a lot.

'For instance, on *Time Machine* we have a long jam in the middle. Sometimes it goes in directions we have no way of ➔

Gear

Yamaha Attitude basses, Hartke amplifiers and bass cabinets, Billy Sheehan Signature EBS drive, MXR bass compressor and Octabass pedals. Pearce preamp, Line 6 wireless units and Keith McMillen bass pedals

Photo: Travis Shinn

Sheehan with trademark Yamaha: 'It's got my tweaks, but it's the same as any other'

predicting until nature takes its course. Another time, Mike comes off his stool and comes downstage with his sticks, breaking down to a quiet section.

'On a couple of songs we do a speed-up slow-down thing. I don't know where it came from... it just happened. It was cool. But every song evolves in some way or another. We have a lot of vocals; when we did the record we weren't familiar with the songs, but now Mike and I sing a lot more along with Richie.'

Like Jeff Beck and Lindsey Buckingham, Richie Kotzen plays without a pick, and Billy feels this gives them a bond. 'We connect really well with some of the lines we play together because it's a similar nature of playing with fingers.'

But as ever, he stresses, it's the relationship with the drummer that is key. 'The bass is the relationship between time and melody – that was my basic understanding from the very beginning. I lock in with Mike like I am in a telepathic trance with him. We play things together that we've never worked out, never discussed, never talked about; it happens. And it happens simultaneously – I play what he plays when he plays it.

'Once in a while one of us will move out of our supportive role and do our own thing, then pop back to the ensemble. The key thing I'm watching is always the drums, but I'm also connecting that to what Richie's doing. I'm giving Richie that solid foundation.'

Many feel Billy has elevated the status of the bass player during his three decades in the spotlight. 'If people have got a positive influence from that then I'm pleased,' he grins. 'But I come from a time when there wasn't so much this hierarchy in a band, where the bass player is in the background and the guitar player and singer are the main guys. In the Beatles Paul McCartney was one of the frontmen, he was the guy... and Ringo was as important as everyone else.'

Sheehan tailors his contribution to the song. Back in 2007, when our conversation was a little more leisurely, he came up with this analogy: 'I do root notes and quarter notes more than any other thing. But when you see a cake the first thing you notice is the frosting. Forget about the fact that we've beaten many eggs and sifted many pounds of flour to make the foundation.'

That said, anyone at Sonisphere would have seen Billy take his fair share of the spotlight, as any bassist in a power trio is apt to do. 'Personally I like to be upfront in what's going on,' he admits. 'I don't try to grab the attention, but sometimes there's attention to be grabbed. Sometimes you're in the front of everything, being the main sonic quality of that particular piece of music, but being a part of it also means laying back. I like there to be variation instead of sameness and conformity, and I think that whatever any bass player chooses is right because there is no right or wrong when you're talking about art, the creation of music.'

↦

BORN TO CLASSIC ROCK

Cream, Zeppelin and Humble Pie are among the Winery Dogs' inspirations – but naming Mr Big after a Free song outed Billy Sheehan as a Brit-rock fan long ago.

He got his first taste at the Memorial Auditorium in hometown Buffalo, New York, when he saw UK-based Yank Jimi Hendrix and the Who in quick succession. 'My first ever concert was Jimi, Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding. I was in eighth or ninth grade. Soft Machine opened up, they were amazing. Then Hendrix came on, and I couldn't believe it! He killed, the place went berserk. It was amazing; a life-changer, literally.

'The Who are playing their final tour – well, what a drag. I don't know who Roger and Pete have playing for them, but I hope whoever it is tries to channel the energy and emotion that Entwistle and Moon had – because the original line-up blew my mind when I was a kid. I loved that band on many, many levels and I have live shows of theirs from all over the place in my bootleg collection... some really cool stuff.

'I met John Entwistle 'many times – he was a fantastic guy. I got to do a photoshoot with John and Steve Harris at the Rotosound factory a few months before he passed.'

The Winery Dogs: Billy Sheehan, Mike Portnoy and Richie Kotzen

Photo: Travis Shinn

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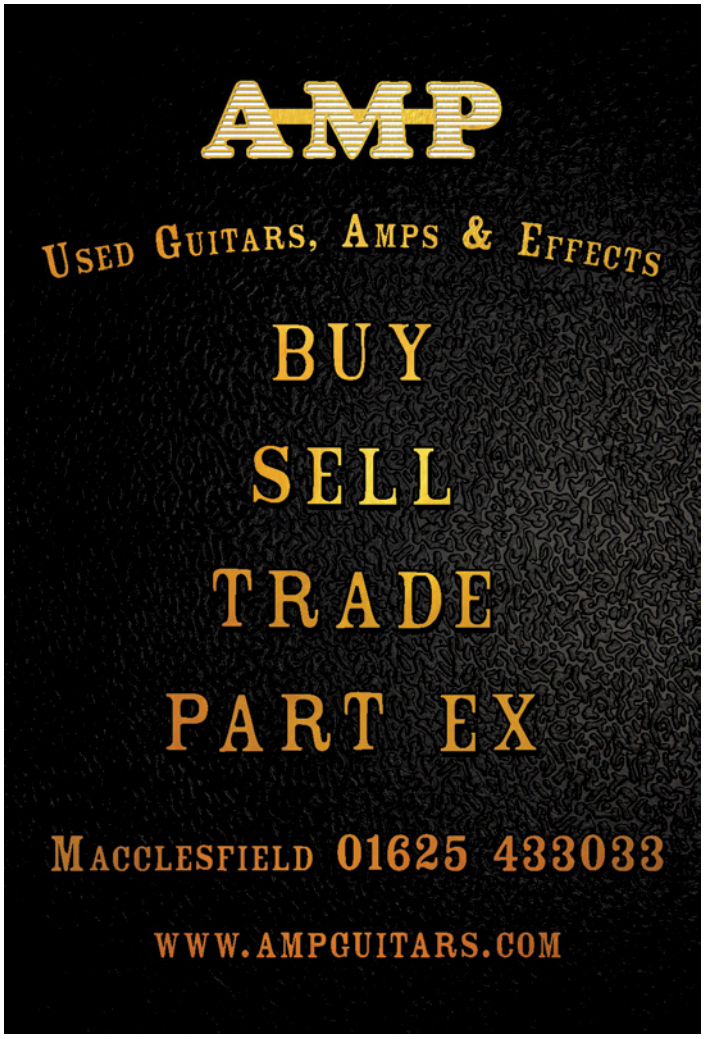
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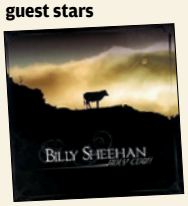
Listen up

DAVID LEE ROTH
Eat 'Em And Smile
(1986)
The ex-Van Halen frontman's debut long-player catapulted Billy Sheehan into the big time

THE WINERY DOGS
Unleashed In Japan
(2014)
The studio album with added balls, plus a cool cover of Elvin Bishop's song *Fooled Around And Fell In Love*

BILLY SHEEHAN
Holy Cow!
(2009)
The most recent solo effort featured ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons, King's X man Doug Pinnick and Mr Big's Paul Gilbert as special guest stars



And another thing...

Back in the day, 'winery dogs' were employed to keep unwanted creatures from messing up the grapevines

In gear terms, Billy is still faithful to his signature dual-output Yamaha Attitude bass in seafoam green (it even has its own Facebook page). He continues to play the commercially available version, the third to be offered, rather than a custom shop example. 'I do my tweaks, of course, but it's from the production line, the same as any other.'

Amplification, however, is a different matter. He now uses Hartke amps and cabs to deliver his signature blend of distortion and definition, feeding one output through 15" cabs and the other through 4x10s. His Hartke HA5500 gives him his highs with an 'inverted smile' EQ pattern, 1000W LH1000s (one for bass pedals) providing the low end, while his own signature EBS drive, MXR bass compressor and Octabass are all on the pedalboard he flies with.

'I've been with Hartke for several years,' he comments. 'I started with Ampeg, but they went through dramatic changes and one of them was the way they dealt with artists who endorsed their products. They really let it go, and I had believed in them and endorsed them for many years, but the nature of the product changed, the manufacturing process changed dramatically... so I headed somewhere else. I should say, if I design something, I get a royalty on the work I did designing it – but I don't get paid to endorse.'

In terms of gear acquisition, Billy is no collector. 'Most of my instruments are just workhorses. I have a couple of collectable instruments. I have an old Telecaster bass, I have my original old P bass, I've got a sister to that; I've got an Epiphone Rivoli – I'm a big Paul Samwell-Smith [Yardbirds] fan, that's what he played – and I've got a Hofner I got in London, on one of my first bass clinics here. Other than those, most of the instruments I have are tools to get the job done.'

It's been a while since Sheehan's last solo album, 2009's *Holy Cow!*, and he admits it's high time for another. 'I have my iPhone with me, so I videotape ideas. I have hundreds of snippets with me sitting around in my underpants! I'm sure there'll be one out pretty soon.' The solo roll call also numbers 2001's *Compression* and *Cosmic Troubadour* from 2005.

One potential guest for the next record has, sadly, been scratched from Billy's wishlist. 'Paco de Lucia, who unfortunately passed away recently, was one of my favourites of all time... his playing was beyond words. I was hoping someday to be graced by his presence in any way, shape or form, but unfortunately we lost him. I'll have to think of someone new.'

Sheehan's returning to Britain with Mr Big in October, the band having re-formed, initially for a 2009 tour of Japan. I'm looking forward to it,' he bubbles. 'We've just finished a new record. The other guys don't want to tour as much as they used to, and that's all right. I got the Winery Dogs now, I got a full schedule. It's good we're playing again; I love those guys!'

Photo: Travis Shinn

HAPPY CAMPING

The First Annual Dog Camp took place in late July in New York State – another example of Billy Sheehan passing on his knowledge to aspiring musicians. 'We thought we'd do it as a band rather than three individuals,' he says. 'I've put a zillion bands together, so I thought I'd show them what the procedure is.'

When we spoke, Billy was already looking forward to the end of the camp when he was going to put down his bass and play DJ. 'I'll have my iTunes collection with me, which is about a terabyte and a half of impossible to find, really great stuff. Demos, gigs, rare songs and records... so the last night is going to be an educational night.

'There'll be David Lee Roth *Eat 'Em And Smile* demos, Mr Big demos, Winery Dogs outtakes, all kinds of things like that. It'll be a really fun time!'

School was never like this in our day...

Between now and then, Billy's producing a record in New York by a young lady called Madame Mayhem. 'I think I get some free time in December,' laughs this in-demand four-stringer who, more than any other individual in recent years, has given bass players a new prominence. His advice to those who want to follow him is to listen widely: 'It helps you expand your vocabulary. You can use it to do your own thing; it adds a little extra flavour. There are great records, goldmines everywhere of incredible inspiration by so many amazing artists that have come before us. So I'm always trying to find other artists in different styles.'

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FENDER
Custom Shop '60s Heavy Relic Stratocaster

Fender's Relic project is just a year shy of 20 years old. So now we're used to them, how do the latest ones stack up? Review by **Richard Purvis**

If you go to see the ancient cave paintings of Lascaux, you don't actually see the ancient cave paintings of Lascaux – you see modern facsimiles painted in the cave next door. It's unfortunate, you might even say slightly ridiculous, but the originals are in such a fragile state that this was the best solution they could think of to protect them, short of closing the whole site down. Now, if you apply the same reasoning to vintage guitars – beautiful and precious but too delicate for life on the road – then 'relics' make perfect sense: these instruments are simply the accessible replicas in the cave next door. Still, though... in a world awash with fakery, from knock-off iPhones to miming pop idols, do we honestly need new guitars that pretend to be old guitars?

If you saw last month's issue you'll surely have read Huw Price's analysis of this very question, a well-argued call for hissy huffers like me to chill a bit and accept relics as a fun and harmless addition to the pickers' pantheon. Maybe he has a point – and maybe spending some time with the outrageously battered Stratocaster that illustrated that article is just what's required to plunge the point home. The Strat's here, so let's find out.

It's a product of the Fender Custom Shop, which would normally mean a gleaming artefact of such immaculate refinement that you'd want someone with silk gloves to lift it out of the case for you. But when Fender's own experts have spent a fair while bumping, scuffing and scratching away at an instrument to simulate half a century of use and abuse, it's hard to know whether you should be careful with it or not. We'll avoid lobbing it down the stairs, just to be on the safe side.

Subtle neck wear and the tell-tale Custom Shop decal

Moderate forearm rub patch; this relic is not nearly as 'heavy' as some

There are three different pickup types: a Custom '69 in the neck, a Fat '50s in the middle and a Texas Special at the bridge

This Strat comes in a hard case the colour of Dairy Milk with plenty of candy inside: chunky strap, cotton-covered lead, toolkit, Custom Shop certificate of authenticity (shouldn't that be inauthenticity?), and even a bridge cover. There's also a polishing cloth, to keep your relic, er, good as new.

The body is two-piece alder with a near-invisible centre join, the scratchplate is a murky shade ➔

FACTFILE

CUSTOM SHOP '60S HEAVY RELIC STRATOCASTER

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody guitar. Made in USA**
PRICE **£3098**

BUILD **Alder body, maple bolt-on neck with 21-fret rosewood fingerboard; vintage-style vibrato bridge and tuners**
ELECTRICS **Three single-coil pickups, five-way switch, master volume, tone for neck and middle pickups**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Three-tone sunburst only**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 53mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
12th fret 25mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 56mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.75mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT **3.4kg/7.5lbs**

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Fender
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Springfield
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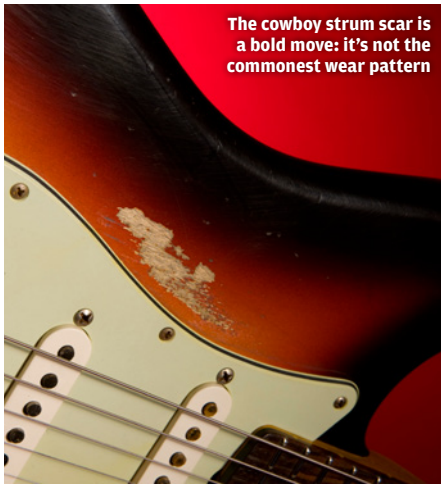
RRP **£1799**

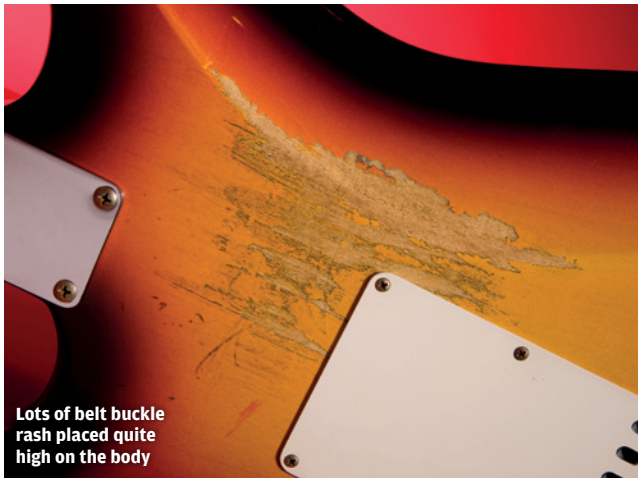
Eternal
S-Type
British option with the emphasis on classily distressed finishes, and specs as close to an old Strat as you want
RRP **from £1500**

The mixture of greenish and off-white parts won't be to everyone's taste


The cowboy strum scar is a bold move: it's not the commonest wear pattern

This is a supremely well-made guitar with a balanced tone and lots of perky character, and the neck is a speedy joy

of mint green and the other plastic parts are more cream than off-white. Blackened polepieces contrast dramatically with the pickup covers, while the saddles and screws are also heavily tarnished, but it's on the timber that Fender has really got medieval. The 'sloppy strummer' gouge above the scratchplate is the most obvious mark but there's a bigger explosion of wood-deep buckle rash on the back, plus lots of scratches around the sides and subtle checking to the nitro finish all over the body. There are dark patches behind the decals on the front of the headstock; there's also a bit of rust on the tuners, next to a Fender Custom Shop logo that ensures nobody's going to think this really is a '60s Strat. The lacquer on the back of the neck has been worn to a slight roughness that feels agreeable in the hand and, in both look and texture, is an excellent match for the real thing. Have they missed anything? Maybe: the gold characters on the volume and tone knobs look too shiny and new to me.


Lots of belt buckle rash placed quite high on the body

Even more pristine is the front of the neck, but this is for the best – few would have thanked Fender for simulated fret-wear and finger-grime. The medium jumbo frets are fairly low-profile and have been fitted perfectly, with nicely rounded ends; combine that with a thoroughly modern 9.5" radius to the rosewood fingerboard, on a neck that's quite shallow, particularly towards the nut, and you've got the perfect recipe for a guitar that plays like I Can't Believe It's Not Butter. Well, you'd be disappointed if it didn't at this price.

The spec list reveals that three different pickup types from Fender's Strat collection have been selected for this model: a Custom '69 in the neck position, a Fat '50s in the middle and a Texas Special at the bridge. The five-way switch is not something you'd find on a real 50-year-old guitar, but that's another understandable victory for practicality over authenticity.

Sounds

Unplugged this Stratocaster is full and ringy, with impressive sustain, and you can really feel open chords resonating through your chest when playing seated. It feels like quality. And plugging into a Fender amp that really is 50 years old it's apparent that, while the pickups may not be a set, they're well-matched for sprightliness. The guitar's core voice is taut and punchy, with just enough solidity in the bottom end and plenty of kick at the top. The neck pickup is extremely clear and characterful, the middle has more edge and cluck but is equally bluesy at heart, and the bridge is the place to go for trouser-biting snarly stuff – although, as so often with traditionally-wired Strats, there's no way of rolling off a bit of the spikiness because only the other two pickups have tone controls. All three pickups respond eagerly to overdrive, just as you'd expect them to, and both middle and bridge are great for greasy-toned slide work.

That just leaves the two in-between positions. Both have plenty of that '80s quack that makes some people think of Knopfler and Robert Cray, and others think of buying a gun. Use them wisely, though, and you will find some sweet and only slightly mallard-like tones that just about everyone can enjoy.

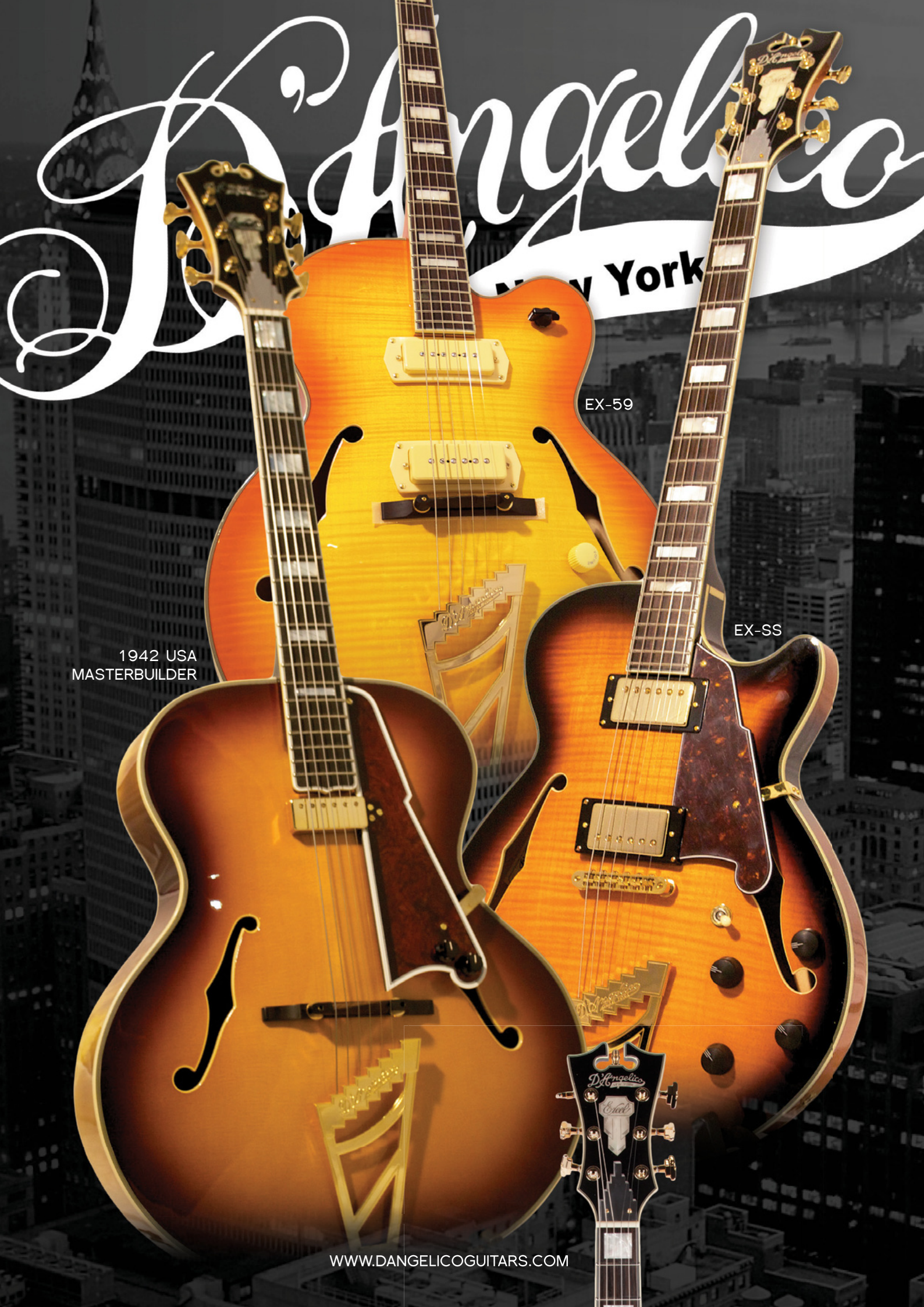
Verdict

Thoughtlessly, Fender neglected to send us a vanload of real '60s Strats for comparison, but no matter what you're judging it against, this is a supremely well-made guitar with a balanced tone and lots of perky character, and the neck is a speedy joy. On performance alone, there's no denying it's a very fine Stratocaster. It doesn't quite feel like a vintage guitar to me, but that's such a vague and almost subconscious judgement that it's hard to be sure it's fair – after all, we probably wouldn't analyse the damage on a genuine old-timer half as closely. Anyway, bash it around enough and in a decade or two you won't be able to tell the real damage from the relicing. All in all, this is one £3000 guitar that you've no excuse to mollycoddle.

FINAL SCORE

CUSTOM SHOP '60S HEAVY RELIC STRAT

Build Quality	**19**/20
Playability	**19**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**13**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**87%**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REVELATION VTX63

On the surface it's 100 per cent 1960s and Vox-tastic, but under the skin lie a different vibrato and three new pickups. **Marcus Leadley** examines a slice of pentagonal madness

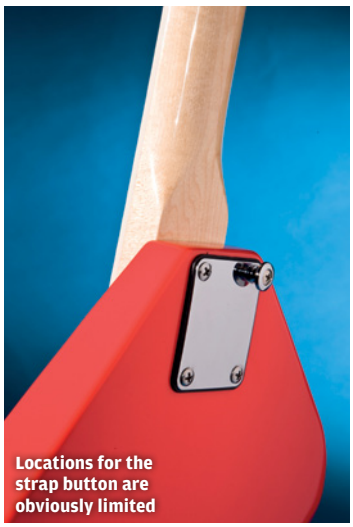
If any guitar could sum up the quirkiness of British invention in the 1960s, it had to be the Vox Phantom. Launched in 1962, it looked like nothing anyone had seen before. While it had its own distinctive voice, the performance and feel were very Strat-like: three single-coil pickups, a bolt-on neck and a Bigsby-inspired vibrato delivered plenty of classic twangy tones. While the Phantom's looks certainly divided opinion, there was enough interest across the whole range, which included a six-string, 12 string, bass and models loaded with effects, stereo and even organ options, to establish the guitar in the professional pop and psychedelic world. Bands like the Kinks and the Hollies used Vox guitars; so too did the Electric Prunes. Later, the Phantom became a bit of a pawnshop classic, attracting both Captain Sensible of the Damned and Joy Division's Ian Curtis.

The Phantom's been quite tenacious; over the years there have been a number of tributes and reissues. This latest Phantom-inspired offering from Revelation, the VTX63, is part of an extensive range of nice-price instruments aimed straight at the heart of the budget-buyers market. It's cool to see its classic vintage shape alongside the more familiar single-cut and double-cut tributes.

Although the paddle-shaped alder body retains its original Phantom curves, the VTX63 isn't an exact copy. The headstock is a little different – fuller and more rounded – and the guitar sports a Jazzmaster-style vibrato rather than a Bigsby-inspired design. According to designer Alan Entwistle, licensing would have added around £60 to the cost, and he wasn't happy with that. He feels this option works as well if not better, and I'm inclined to agree.

Unlike a true Jazzmaster's floating trem, which allows you to bend up as well as down, this version is set up so that you can only drop the pitch of the strings. It's also heavily sprung, and combined with a serious-looking bridge with roller saddles. As a result, putting the VTX63 out of tune takes some very heavy-handed playing. In performance the guitar's more like a hardtail model and it sustains extremely well. Yes, it can do a little bit of trem action, but this won't be an instrument for the player who wants to go large on the whammy.

All up, the guitar plays very well: the action over the rosewood ➔



Locations for the strap button are obviously limited

Decent Kluson-alikes and a scarfed headstock joint

The VTX63 isn't an exact Vox copy; the headstock is rounder and fuller and it sports a Jazzmaster-style vibrato

FACTFILE
REVELATION VTX63

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody guitar. Made in China**
PRICE **£269.95**

BUILD **Alder body, bolt-on maple neck with rosewood fingerboard. 22 frets plus zero fret. Jazzmaster-style vibrato tailpiece plus fully adjustable bridge with roller saddles. Kluson-style machineheads**
ELECTRICS **Three single coil pickups, master volume and tone controls (middle and neck pickup only), five-way pickup selector**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Fiesta red, vintage white**

SCALE LENGTH
647mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 52.2mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20.3mm
12th fret 23.2mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 50.2mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.5mm
12th fret bass 1.7mm
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Phantom
Guitar Works
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Eastwood, Hutchins, Teisco, Domino...
A surprising number of companies have made Phantom copies over the years, Eastwood and Hutchins most recently. Or why not grab the real McCoy – one of the few '60s guitars you'll find for under £2000 these days!
RRP **various**

Vibrato looks familiar but has no locking feature. Bridge has roller saddles

Master volume and tone knobs for neck and middle, just like the original

fretboard is incredibly low and the use of the zero fret is an accurate Vox touch that guarantees a great first position action and a tight, twangy feel. The maple neck has a two-piece construction, with the headstock scarf jointed on under the third fret. This is a perfectly functional solution that arguably makes the neck stronger, but it's also a tell-tail sign of budget production as it means the factory will get through less timber. However, the medium-gauge frets are well installed and the white edge binding adds a touch of period class. Unfortunately the neck joint is pretty uncompromising, so getting all the way up to the 22nd fret requires determination.

The VTX63's electrics are pretty straightforward: three single-coil pickups, master volume, tone controls for the middle and neck position pickups (no tone control for the bridge pickup) and a five-way selector – not the three-way of the original Phantom. The selector is wired in exactly the same way as a contemporary Fender Strat so you have two noise-free phase cancelling options in positions 2 and 4. The pickups are Alan's own design. Cryptically, he suggests that he set out to make them as much like the originals as possible – but also a little different.

Sounds

The basic clean tone has a bright, chiming ring to it. The midrange is rich without being boxy or too full in the mouth, and there's a nicely balanced response from the bass strings. Even the bridge pickup delivers in an uncoloured fashion and the sound is great for clean chords and melodies.

Moving through the various selector options, the colour palette is very Strat-like. The out of phase tones are funky and good for recording due to the hum-cancelling characteristic. The middle pickup has the most even frequency response and it sounds a lot like the VTX63's unamplified acoustic voice, which makes it a good option for strumming along to songs. The neck pickup offers a more mellow, bass-rich sound, and backing off the tone control a little gives you a good jazzy tone.

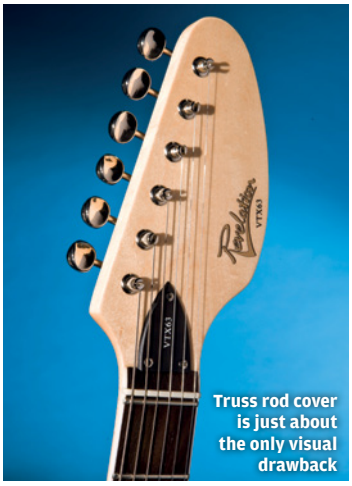
Pairing the VTX63 with a Vox AC30 is an obvious thing to do, and the guitar performs very well as you gradually wind up the gain. On the way up there are plenty of bluesy lead options to explore and with extra gain it opens up to big chunky chords, solid riffs and some wailing solo action.

Does it sound like a vintage Phantom? Not especially – the new pickups are definitely more powerful and frankly, better voiced. This makes the VTX more flexible, but you need to play around with a graphic EQ to get to the thinner, jangly tones associated with '60s psychedelia.

Verdict

The VTX63 is a likeable guitar that's loads of fun to play. For the money it punches well above its weight both in terms of its sound and playability, and the alternative tremolo works very well. The Phantom body shape won't appeal to everyone but for plenty of players it's a look that sums up the enthusiasm of '60s Britain. Anyone in a period covers band should definitely try one of these. However, if you play a lot sitting down it might not be the best choice; you'll need to keep it on a strap to stop it sliding off your knee. This is a contemporary guitar rather than a slavish retro copy, and the pickups are much hotter and fuller sounding, so you get a lot more than just jangle for your money. Realistically, if the Phantom had played and sounded like this in the '60s, it would probably have taken the world by storm. Now isn't that a strange thought?

Squared-off pickup covers really add that authentic '60s look


Truss rod cover is just about the only visual drawback

FINAL SCORE

REVELATION VTX63	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Looks	**18**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

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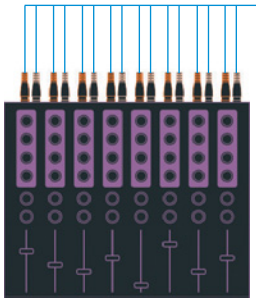
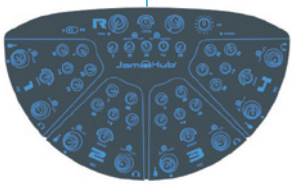
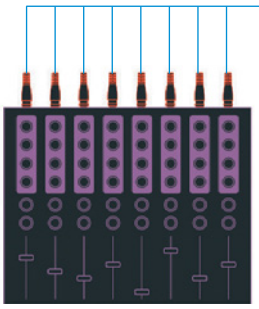


Connects to most mixing consoles using The Tracker MT16 16 channel Breakout Cable



Connects to all JamHub studios with the JamHub Connect Cable



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LAJZY

LAZY J
35 Combo

Lazy J has gained a fine reputation with UK guitarists, and we grab the chance to inspect the brand-new 3x10" combo. Review by **Richard Purvis**

FACTFILE
LAZY J 35 COMBO

DESCRIPTION **35W 3x10" valve combo; 3 x ECC83 and 2 x 6L6 valves plus GZ34 rectifier. Made in UK**
PRICE **£2279 for basic model, £2843 as reviewed (reverb module £342, tremolo module £222)**

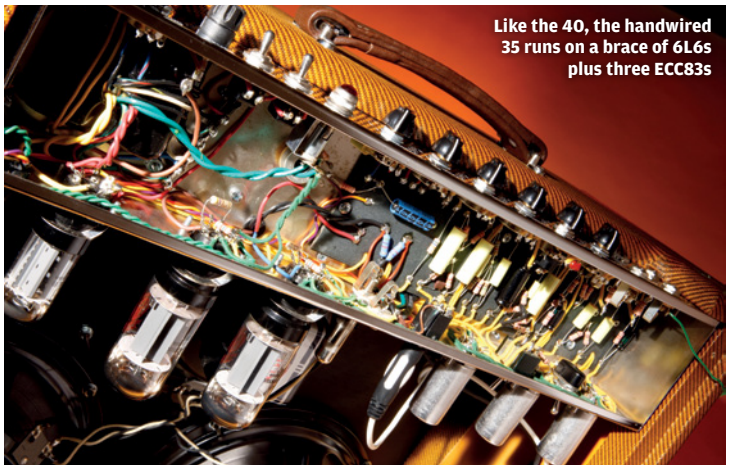
CONTROLS **Normal 1&2 and Bright 1&2 inputs; Normal volume, Bright volume (pull for gain boost), Treble, Bass, Middle, Presence; Standby and Power switches; 'Ground' (negative feedback loop) control; preamp boost and tweed/blackface voltage switches on bottom panel**
DIMENSIONS **60cm wide, 60cm high, 26.5cm deep**
WEIGHT **21.6kg/48lbs**

CONTACT **Lazy J Projects 0843 2894089 www.lazyjprojects.com**

Pete Townshend's got a nose for a good amp. Britain's leading windmiller already owns a bunch of Lazy J combos, and when he requested a 3x10" extension cab for one of them, the results were so impressive that the natural next step was a combo in the same format. Our Lazy J 35 is apparently the second off the production line... and you can probably guess who's got the first.

It's not really a production line, though – this is amp-building at a genuinely 'boutique' level, with each product handwired and hand-assembled by Jesse Hoff, a London-based American. Trotting out the Lazy J roll-call again might not be necessary, but here's a few just in case: David Gilmour, Paul Weller, Eric Clapton... and that bloke out of the Who.

Hoff isn't the first designer to cram three 10" speakers into a tight-fitting tweed jacket: Fender came out with the 3x10" Bandmaster combo in 1955. The 35 is not some kind of Bandmaster clone, though – the circuitry is based on that of the 1x12" Lazy J 40, with a few tweaks intended to get the best out of the new speaker configuration. Like the 40, it's available with or without valve-powered reverb and tremolo modules that are attached to the inside of the cab. Our sample has both, plus a double footswitch for turning the effects on and off as well as making remote adjustments to reverb hugeness and tremolo speed. Power comes from a pair of 6L6s, hanging alongside a GZ34 rectifier, and the speakers are US-made Eminence Legends.



Like the 40, the handwired 35 runs on a brace of 6L6s plus three ECC83s

Not a Bandmaster clone, the 35 is based on the Lazy J 40, with a few tweaks to get the best out of the 3x10" configuration

We're familiar by now with the toffee-tinted tweed covering on Hoff's amps. It's a finish that gives them a certain sense of age, as if they've been sitting in a dingy club for 50 years and the smoking ban never happened, but this is not a relic job: the covering is neatly edged and the lacquer has a shine of newness. The solid pine cab is impressively built, and there's ➔

Like this? Try this...

Lazy J
40 Combo
A little more headroom than the 35 justifies the name; this is Lazy J's loud but relatively compact 1x12" option
RRP **£2099-£2663**

Fender
'57 Bandmaster
Official reissue of the original 3x10" tweed combo, rated at 26W and packing a trio of alnico Jensen speakers
RRP **£2615**

Victoria
Victorilux
From a highly-rated US boutique builder, the Victorilux is available in a variety of formats including 3x10" and includes reverb and tremolo
RRP **£2195**

Two separate channels, four inputs and a 3-band EQ plus a Presence control

The Bright channel volume is a push-pull pot, giving a mids-accentuating gain boost that works on both channels

a clear nod to the Bandmaster in the arrangement of the two rear panels, the lower one featuring a pair of rounded 'windows' with dark brown grille cloth matching the stuff on the front. Enough space has been left in the middle to allow easy access to the reverb and tremolo modules, while the narrower windows in the upper panel give the valves some fresh air and reveal the presence of two mysterious switches on the bottom of the chassis.

First we'll have a look at the top. Like the 40, the 35 uses a generic chassis designed for Fender clones and so, like the 40, it has a level control for the negative feedback loop that's labelled – misleadingly or charmingly, depending on your attitude to such quirks – as Ground. Then there's a Presence control, a three-way tone stack and Volume controls for the two channels, Bright and Normal. Bright volume is a push-pull pot, and pulling it out engages a mids-accentuating gain boost that works on both channels. That just leaves the four inputs, two for each channel, and here's a surprising albeit piffling gripe: the curve of the cabinetry runs so close to the normal channel's second (attenuated) input that it's quite hard to squeeze a chunky jack plug in there. Let's hope Hoff will file off an extra millimetre or two on subsequent builds.

Sound

With a Gibson SG plugged into the normal channel, all the tone controls at halfway and Volume fairly low, it's sweet, smooth and pure, and even at 'barely awake' levels there's an easy, natural feel that makes you think the amp is part of the guitar and the guitar is part of you. Turn up to about 11 o'clock and the added gain brings more thickness and sustain, but nothing is lost along the way. It's effortlessly nice, and while switching from humbuckers to a perky Jazzmaster might necessitate a few adjustments to the Treble and Presence controls, you're never far from the perfect tweed tone here.

The Bright channel is much more brisk and fiery, and running both channels together with a patch lead opens up your options further – including the option to crank both channels and party like it's 1969. It does get very gainy, but those little 10" speakers never lose control. And if we bring the negative feedback loop into the circuit? This has a subtle but distinct deadening effect, likely to suit some guitars better than others, that feels a little like switching off a reverb that you can't actually hear.

For a reverb that you can hear, simply stomp on the footswitch. It can be gentle and it can be massive, and the inclusion of a tone control is a handy way of allowing you to keep it cavernously long but stop the springiness swamping your tone. Just as nifty is the tremolo module, which provides smooth, vintage-style throbbing with just as much depth as you want – and the speed control on the footswitch is a feature that a lot of gigging guitarists are likely to welcome like free beer. It's a pity these modules together add over £500 to the price, because it would be a shame to do without either.

Don't worry, we haven't forgotten those two switches on the bottom of the chassis. One, borrowed from the Lazy J 40, changes the voltages within the preamp circuit for a slightly harder, more blackface-like sound; the other provides a preamp gain boost, more transparent and less pronounced than the push-pull on the Volume control. You shouldn't expect radical revoicing: both of these little bonus features work on the assumption that, being a connoisseur of tweediness, you're happy with the amp's core tone and just want microscopic control over the details. Add them to all the clever things going on across the top panel, and that's precisely what you've got.

Verdict

Unfortunately we don't have Pete Townshend's fortune or his selection of Lazy J amps, so comparisons with the other models are difficult – but the 35 is surely no less sweet-sounding than the 40, and from memory, it may well be better. This is about as much money as anyone is ever likely to spend on one amplifier, so it has to be in the highest rank of gorgeous... and luckily, it is.

Speakers look to be 35W alnico magnet Eminence 1028Ks

The reverb module adds £342 – hefty, but it sounds very good

FINAL SCORE

LAZY J 35 COMBO	
Build Quality	**19**/20
Versatility	**17**/20
Sound	**20**/20
Value for money	**16**/20
Vibe	**20**/20
TOTAL	**92%**

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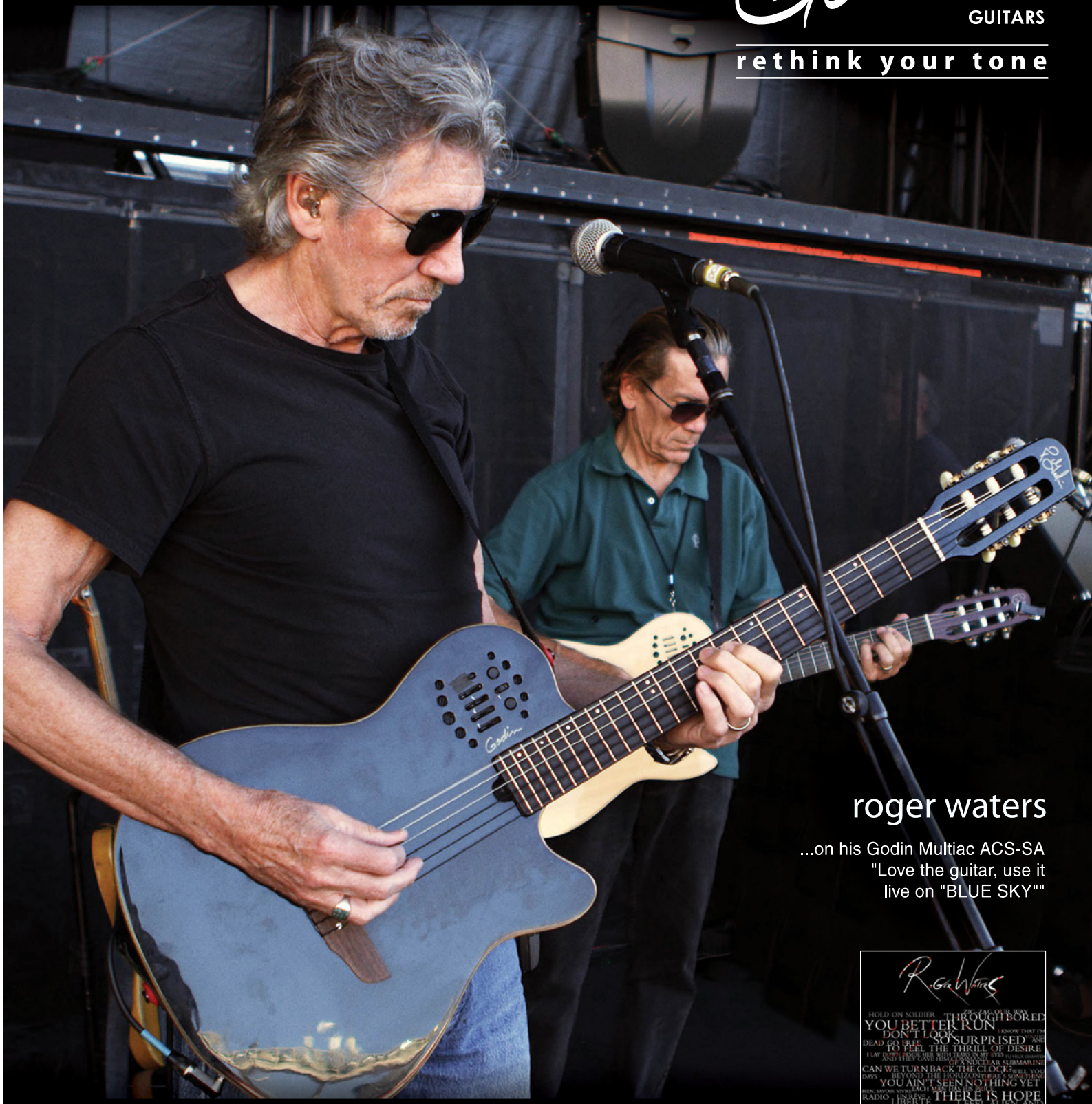

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XVIVE
W2 Overdrive Fuzz

Fancy freshening up your sound? This well-priced and adaptable overdrive/fuzz could help turn you into a rock monster. Review by **Marcus Leadley**

In the last five years we've seen something of a revolution in the budget pedal market. New Chinese brands, emerging from the technology powerhouse of Shenzhen, are forcing the pace. Price competition is keen, and mini pedals have started to become a new standard.

Xvive only launched in 2012, and its range already includes 14 itty-bitty pedals priced between £32 and £52. Now we have three new pedals in the W series: the Overdrive Fuzz, Wave Phaser and Memory Analogue Delay.

Priced at £105, these units offer better specs and a return to a familiar, larger format with full-size rotary controls. As a result, they're set to appeal more to players who like to tweak their sound a lot. One of the ways Xvive differentiates itself from the horde is to make a point of naming its tech team and to big up the 'designed in the USA' nature of the product. The Xvive pedal gurus includes former Electro-Harmonix designer Howard Davis, DSP/analogue expert Darius Mostowfi, and Ray Heasman, who's designed for Pigtronix. So let's see if the sum total of these reputations amounts to something special...

Chinese manufacturers love bright colours and you'll find this shamrock green slab hard to miss. It's a slightly larger enclosure than the 1590BB Hammond-style box favoured by boutique makers. There are five controls: Drive Level, Dynamics, Distortion (hard left for maximum overdrive, hard right for maximum fuzz), Fuzz Tone, and Volume. The audio In/Out jack sockets are on the unit's sides and the power socket is on the back (there's no internal battery option, so an adapter is required). This unit requires an 18v 200mA wall wart, which probably won't be the type of thing you have kicking about, so unless your board's power supply outputs different voltages then you'll be need to shell out a further £11.99 for the Xvive unit.

Sounds

After a bit of initial knob-twiddling it soon becomes apparent that the W2's controls are highly interactive. This means it's best to establish some sort of starting point to work out from. This turns out to involve setting the Volume and Dynamics to about 12 o'clock, Drive Level to around 3 o'clock and Distortion hard left for full overdrive. Fuzz Tone is set at 0 as it only affects the tone of the fuzz. This setting gives you something very close to your basic guitar sound plus a pleasing hint of overdrive when you hit the strings with force. It's a great sound, and the relatively high Dynamic setting gives the effect a believable valve-like compression that's great for blues rhythm and lead playing.

Increasing Drive moves you into more rocky territory. Winding down the Dynamic control gives you a more processed, pedal-like overdrive – good for certain types of metal. All these tweaks will require some adjustment of the Volume if you want to keep the guitar sound at a similar overall level. The absence of an overdrive tone control is slightly inexplicable, but it doesn't spoil the party.

The Distortion knob works very well. Twisting away slightly from the hard left of the full overdrive setting lets you add a slight hint of fuzz to the tail end of your notes. The fact that the tone control only works on the fuzz sound means you can do some very subtle sound shaping and blending. Keep on twisting the Distortion knob until you're playing with a full-on fuzz tone; this can make your bass strings sound like a cross between ripping Velcro and twangy elastic bands. Psychedelic riffs and melodies are great fun and funky bass sounds awesome. You can massage the Overdrive/Fuzz mix very subtly and the temptation to keep tweaking rather than get on and play is hard to resist.

Verdict

With so many great overdrive and fuzz pedals around these days, it's really hard to make a choice. This Xvive offers a smart, hybrid solution that's extremely versatile, easy to tweak and capable of delivering an almost unlimited palate of characters and tones. It responds very well to different pickup types, for the most part doesn't obscure an instrument's basic sound, and the signal-to-noise ratio is pretty good even at extreme settings. All up, it delivers a taste of that high-end tone and flexibility, but at a sensible, everyday price.

FINAL SCORE

OPA-101 OVERDRIVEN PRE-AMP	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Usability	**18**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

FACTFILE
Xvive W2 Overdrive Fuzz

SPECS **Chinese-built true bypass overdrive/fuzz pedal. 18V power supply required**
RRP **£105**

CONTROLS **Dynamics, Drive Level, Distortion (Overdrive-Fuzz), Fuzz Tone (Bass Treble), Volume**

CONTACT **JHS**
01132 865 381
ww.jhs.co.uk

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Evil overdrive and fuzz, designed by Paul Trombetta off his Mini-Bone, with a boost option when you need it
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TC ELECTRONIC
Alter Ego X4

Find you don't repeat yourself enough these days? Well, get yourself some vintage-inspired echo with modern tweakability. Review by **Marcus Leadley**

Guitarists have been adding echo and delay effects to their playing since the 1950s, and the battle between old analogue circuits and new digital solutions still rages on the internet. Enter the Alter Ego X4: now, says TC Electronic, you can enjoy the idiosyncrasies of analogue delay without sourcing, servicing, storing and lugging vintage kit... and of course you get a flexible 21st century interface.

There are 12 vintage models at the Alter Ego X4's heart, but as this is a contemporary pedal you're not limited to the vintage options: there are four memory locations where you can load and store any of TC's TonePrints. The unit comes pre-loaded with signature delays by Steve Morse, Bumblefoot, Doug Aldrich and James Schaffer.

The X4 format means you have four stomp switches: three presets for each model and a dedicated Tap Temp button. There are Time, Feedback and Delay Level controls and a mini toggle to select either quarter note, dotted eighth note repeats or both at the same time. You can use MIDI to switch between models, and there's a USB port where you can connect your Mac or PC to download new TonePrints from the web, edit them and update your pedal. There's also an app for your phone that lets you select TonePrints and then 'beam' them wirelessly to the Alter Ego through your guitar's pickups. The unit will function in mono or stereo, and there's an onboard 40 second looper.

Sounds

With analogue delay there's always a progressive loss of top end as the signal degrades. This blurs the sound, creating a beautiful moving filter effect, and at high feedback settings it adds a dreamy undercurrent to your playing. These characteristics vary, and this helps define the sound of the different units.

Starting with the TonePrints I'm most familiar with, the Watkins Copicat and the Boss DM-2 (mine are both still in regular use), the results are extremely impressive; the initial sound and the decay parameters are spot on. However, the 'Copicat' doesn't sound exactly like my Copicat; tape stock, tension and 40-odd years of wear have all contributed to the exact tone. While the DM-2 model sounds realistic, the controls interact slightly differently so you can't play the feedback in quite the same way. The Electro-Harmonix models showcase vibrato and chorus effects as well as delay. The two Binson emulations are extremely musical, the Maestro Echoplex does rockabilly very well, and the Roland Space Echo retains the evenness and clarity of the original.

An expression pedal can be assigned to control time, feedback or level settings – this isn't something you could do with the originals, so there's plenty to do here that's not just about emulating the past. The pedal is also smart enough to know when you're connected to the stereo outputs and the dual delays are automatically sent to left and right. The only way any of the mono vintage delays would normally be heard in stereo would be as a result of multitracking... so this is a very contemporary creative twist.

The looper is engaged by throwing another mini toggle and the stomp switches become Record, Play, Once (single loop iteration) and Undo. This is a very handy as it lets you erase a bad performance. You can tweak or change delays as you record; to record a clean part you have to turn down the delay level to 0. Loops are not stored when the unit's powered down, so make sure you record anything important.

Verdict

The Alter Ego X4 is an extremely useful pedal that delivers a wide range of retro delay sounds. The basic sounds and characters are great, but the vintage mojo associated with the quirks of individual units and their physical controls may feel missing if you know the originals. So while the Alter Ego might not completely replace an old friend, it will open up new options for retro-inspired playing. The contemporary delays, loop function and TonePrint enablement make the unit more flexible, but you'll not be buying this pedal specifically for them; TC has its Flashback X4 version. This is essentially the same pedal but with a less vintage-specific set of models, and it costs around £30 less.

FINAL SCORE

TC ELECTRONIC VINTAGE ECHO PEDAL	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**90%**

FACTFILE
TC Electronic Alter Ego X4

SPECS **Analogue-themed digital modelling delay pedal. Made in Thailand**
RRP **£199**

CONTROLS **Rotary Delay selector (12 vintage TonePrints plus four extra memory locations), Time, Feedback, Delay Level, Looper Level, Looper/Delay selector, Subdivision selector (quarter note, dotted eighth note repeats or both).**
CONNECTIONS **Mono/Stereo In/Out, MIDI In/Out, Expression Pedal, USB, 9v power socket**

DELAYS **Binson Echorec 1; Binson Echorec 2; Electro-Harmonix Deluxe Memory Man Chorus; Electro-Harmonix Deluxe Memory Man Vibrato; Tel Ray Organ Tone, TC Electronic 2290 Modulated; Reverse Modulated; Boss DM-2; Watkins Copicat, Maestro Echoplex 2 and Electro-Harmonix Echo. Additional signature tone prints by Steve Morse, Bumblefoot, Doug Aldrich and James 'Munky' Shaffer**

DIMENSIONS
235mm wide x 145mm deep x 57mm high

CONTACT
www.tclectronic.com

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Delay modeller with 15 presets and a loop sampler – includes tape, solid-state and valve emulations. Rugged and reliable, comes with Tap tempo feature.
RRP **£199**

Danelectro
Reel Echo
Basic tape echo simulator with control over tape warble and solid-state/valve character. Sound on Sound button lets you play over lick just recorded
RRP **£122**

Carl Martin
DeLayla XL
Echoplex emulator with a large number of added features and controls
RRP **£199**

BREEDLOVE
Discovery Dreadnought & Oregon Concert

Two Breedloves but from two countries of origin, in two different styles, and with two vastly different prices – can both these guitars impress us? Review by **Huw Price**

Breedlove has been producing guitars since the early '90s, but in 2010 Kim Breedlove passed over his company to Tom Bedell of the Two Old Hippies brand, which also makes Bedell guitars and Weber mandolins. These days, if your wages, ill-gotten gains or weekly pocket money don't run to a Breedlove acoustic handcrafted in Bend, Oregon, then you can plump for a Chinese-made version instead. This month we're looking at those two extremes: a dreadnought from the Far East, and an concert from the good old USA.

Discovery Dreadnought

Although billed as a dreadnought, this is Breedlove's own spin on a classic theme. The look is more rounded and less boxy than a regular dread, and this gives the Discovery an unexpectedly old-school look; it puts us in mind of pre-war bruisers made by the likes of Washburn, or perhaps a Harmony Sovereign... almost a cross between a dreadnought and jumbo.

The top is solid sitka spruce, with the grain tight and straight at the centre but very wide at the edges. This indicates that maybe only the centre section is cut fully on the quarter, but it's a look that can be seen on plenty of classic Martins and the like, so this isn't of any great concern. The top looks fine under its tinted gloss lacquer, and there's even some attractive bearclaw figuring. The back and sides are laminated sapele. On our review sample it isn't as figured and flamey as sapele can sometimes be, but this will vary from guitar to guitar. The whole body is gloss-finished, while the nato neck with its slim profile, stacked heel and scarf-jointed headstock is satin-finished.

The rosewood fingerboard has black plastic binding to match the body, and the frets are well seated and dressed. The small position dots are made ➔

Stylish headstock and open-gear machineheads

Satin-finish neck comes with strap button installed

The rounded look puts us in mind of a pre-war Washburn or Harmony – almost a cross between a dread and a jumbo

FACTFILE
DISCOVERY DREADNOUGHT

DESCRIPTION **Dreadnought acoustic. Made in China**
PRICE **£299**

BUILD **Solid sitka top, laminated sapele back and sides, black binding, 20-fret set nato neck, rosewood fingerboard/ bridge, open gear tuners**
ELECTRICS **No**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Gloss body/satin neck**

SCALE LENGTH
650mm/25.6"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 53.5mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20mm
12th fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 54.5mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2.5mm
12th fret bass 3.5mm
WEIGHT **1.9kg/4.2lbs**

CONTACT **Rosetti**
01376 550033
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Sunburst dreadnought with solid spruce top, laminated mahogany back/sides and Fishman Isys+ system
RRP **£314**

Takamine
GD30-NAT
Solid spruce top dread with quartersawn X bracing, laminated mahogany back, sides and neck, rosewood fingerboard, gloss body and satin neck
RRP **£220**

Pinless rosewood bridge on a quite praiseworthy solid sitka top

The Discovery can really belt out the volume and it has a chiming, punchy and very well defined sound

from a material with a grey sheen that suggests they could be metal. The asymmetrical headstock is understated and elegant enough, with a rosewood overlay and a pearl logo. The vintage-style open geared tuners are unbranded but look like decent Waverly copies. More importantly they work very smoothly with a 15:1 ratio, and they prevent headstock heaviness.

Pinless bridges are a constant throughout the Breedlove range and the Discovery Dread's rosewood bridge is much plainer than the 'zigzag' design than many of us may associate with the company. The nut and saddle appear to be moulded Tusq or similar, while the nut is fairly well fitted and the saddle is compensated for intonation.

Simple binding and no pickguard but a slick gloss finish on the body

Sound

The dreadnought is the most popular acoustic shape of all, so you may wonder why Breedlove decided to mess with a winning formula. On the other hand, dreadnoughts are not without their shortcomings, and Breedlove is clearly not a company that's content simply to churn out century-old designs. According to the company literature, Breedlove 'set out to enhance the traditional dreadnought sound' with 'the familiarity of a dread, but more nuance and richness than usual'. So how has it all turned out?

The Discovery's most obvious characteristic is loudness. You should expect a certain amount of volume and projection from any dread, but this one can really belt it out. Played hard the Discovery generates a chiming, punchy and very defined sound that's exhilarating to play, but when you soften the attack the tone mellows and sweetens without losing focus. Expanding the internal volume of the soundbox is a path fraught with dangers, but to Breedlove's credit they have retained an impressive degree of snap and definition that really delivers the goods when picking out the bass notes for bluegrass-style rhythm work.

FINAL SCORE

DISCOVERY DREADNOUGHT	
Build Quality	**16**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Looks	**18**/20
TOTAL	**87%**

The midrange isn't too recessed and the treble has plenty of airiness. It can become a tad brash when pushed very hard, but sitka spruce will mellow over time and you can accelerate the process by playing a lot... and that shouldn't be too onerous a task.

Oregon Concert

Myrtle is the type of name one might associate with elderly aunts, but it's also a lesser-known tonewood from the US states of California and Oregon. According to Breedlove, myrtlewood offers a strong fundamental with a powerful voice similar to that of maple. The colour and grain pattern varies dramatically, but on our review sample it has an orangey yellow look with hints of flame and strong grain. Under the perfectly flat satin finish it looks and feels pretty fantastic.

This original shape was used for the very first Breedlove guitars. Described as a 'concert' body, it was 'designed specifically for the fingerstylist to be well balanced, compact, and comfortable to play'. Again the top is solid sitka spruce but it's made from noticeably higher grade stock. The grain is straight, reasonably tight and even in colour, with copious cross-silking. There's no guarantee that posh-looking timber will sound better, but the quality of the material is certainly commensurate with the price. By combining herringbone with black binding Breedlove has also given this traditional decoration a contemporary spin; herringbone is used for the rosette, along with an ultra-thin ring of black, and the result is equally clean and stylish.

The black theme continues with the ebony fingerboard, bridge, peghead overlay and tuner buttons. The pearl logo really pops and the dot marker layout is a nice touch. Unlike the Discovery Dread, the Oregon Concert has a bolt-on neck attachment and this time it's hard rock maple. The nut and saddle are Tusq, and it's clear that extra effort has been put into the fitting and shaping. One potentially confusing piece of info on the Breedlove website mentions the use of a bridge truss, but these are no longer fitted to this particular model.

Controls for the Fishman Ultra-Tone pickup are tucked just inside the soundhole. No details are provided, but it seems that this pickup system combines a fairly standard undersaddle piezo with a volume and bass control. The system comes as standard on this model, along with a hard case.

↦

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FACTFILE
BREEDLOVE OREGON CONCERT

DESCRIPTION **Concert sized acoustic guitar. Made in USA**
PRICE **£1729 inc. case**

BUILD **Solid Sitka spruce top, solid myrtlewood back and sides, herringbone and black binding, 20-fret set maple neck, ebony fingerboard and bridge, compensated Tusq saddle, Tusq nut, 15:1 diecast Breedlove tuners**
ELECTRICS **Fishman Ultra-Tone**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Natural gloss front with satin back and sides**

SCALE LENGTH
650mm/25.6"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 54mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 18mm
12th fret 21.5mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 38mm
Bridge 56mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.5mm
12th fret bass 3mm
WEIGHT **1.9kg/4.2lbs**

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Cutaway electro-acoustic with solid western red cedar top and tropical American mahogany back and sides, ebony fingerboard, Indian rosewood binding, forward shifted bracing and Taylor Expression System
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Yamaha
LSX26C
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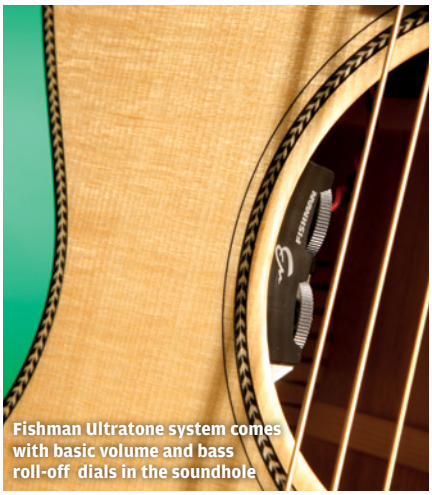
RRP **£2205**

Offset markers and herringbone binding


Fishman Ultratone system comes with basic volume and bass roll-off dials in the soundhole

Modern-looking but able to cover new and old styles, the Oregon performs well for rhythm and especially fingerstyle

Sound

Any concerns that the myrtle would sound overly bright with the sitka spruce were quickly dispelled. The Oregon Concert is far more refined and better-balanced than the Discovery Dread, in keeping with its function and much higher price. The depth and solidity of the bass is perhaps the most surprising characteristic; like any thoroughbred fingerpicker, very little energy is required to get the top moving and the whole guitar feels full of life. Notes fit together sweetly, which makes smooth picking easy, and the timbre emphasises the fundamental rather than complex harmonic overtones.

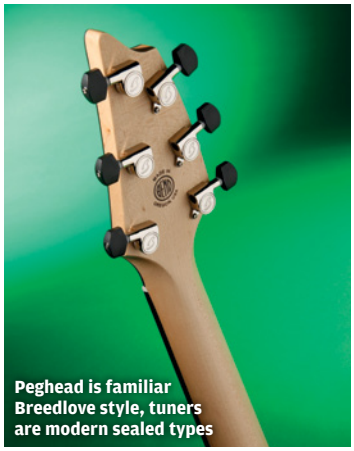
Despite the styling and fast, slim neck, the Oregon Concert provides an unexpected nod to old-school tone. The harmonic dryness and prominent midrange provide a hint of a parlour guitar – albeit with a much expanded frequency range. It's great for blues and ragtime, and it seems to relish dropped tunings. Open tunings also work really well too, and power and definition are retained with open D and C (though we did find the tuners a tad vague). Single notes have a rounded, pure quality that are effective for solo work, and this guitar is very easy to record because it doesn't eat up too much space or add boominess to the low end.

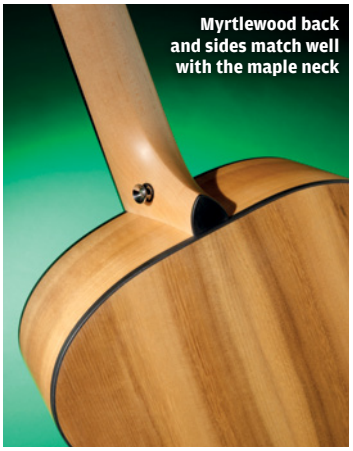
The pickup system is adequate and the sound does bear a resemblance to the Concert's natural tone. If you're really serious then the system could be regarded as a bit basic and 'piezo' sounding, but it's smoother and more tuneful than most of its type. Be aware, the Oregon Concert cannot currently be ordered without the Fishman.

Verdict

The Oregon Concert is a high-quality guitar that performs well for rhythm playing and especially fingerstyle. It should appeal to players who prefer a more modern look but appreciate a guitar that can cover a wide repertoire of old and new styles. The only potential drawback is the Fishman-only policy; this kind of price edges towards the custom area of the market where you could specify the system of your choice.

Although the Discovery is a fine dreadnought, we can't say that it's a great all-rounder. The crisp attack and superb string definition that make it such an effective rhythm instrument also make it a bit of a handful when you attempt more delicate fingerstyle work. If anything it's a bit too lively, but so long as you're aware of its strengths and weaknesses, it won't disappoint – especially at this price.


Peghead is familiar Breedlove style, tuners are modern sealed types


Myrtlewood back and sides match well with the maple neck

FINAL SCORE

BREEDLOVE OREGON CONCERT	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**19**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**16**/20
Looks	**18**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

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LANEY

A1+ Acoustic Amp

Freshly upgraded with more power and more features, Laney's acoustic combo aims to do a tip-top job for the money. Review by **Huw Price**

The Laney A1 has been around for a while and it has proved popular amongst acoustic players. The A1+ retains many of the features that people liked about the original, but now Laney has added a second microphone input and shifted the DI output to the rear panel. A stereo mini-jack is used for auxiliary input rather than RCAs, and a blender control is preferred to simple on/off switching, allowing finer control over wet/dry levels for both channels.

The control layout is also less cluttered and simpler to decipher. The channels are identical, so both get sweepable mid frequency adjustment. The high impedance input has been discarded, but both channels have switchable phantom power to provide voltage for condenser microphones and certain acoustic pickup systems. The effects loop can be switched to -10dB or 0dB and assigned to either or both channels plus all points in between. Power has been increased from 65W to 80W and yet the speaker diameter is now reduced to 8", with a foam layer covering a sturdy kick-proof metal speaker grille.

Sounds

The term 'garbage in garbage out' may have originated during the early days of computing, but it has also been applied to microphone preamplifiers, hi-fi systems and more besides. To clarify, it means that regardless of the quality of the processor or electronic components or the speakers, the quality of the end result is dependant upon the quality of the information at the start of the chain... and so it proved with the A1+.

We began testing with an electro-acoustic fitted with a somewhat pedestrian-sounding undersaddle piezo.

The results were not encouraging, because the A1+ delivered a warts and all rendering of the piezo sound. However we did learn that the EQ controls operate much like the EQ section of a decent mixing desk, and they were certainly powerful enough to dial in a palatable tone regardless.

Next we dusted down an acoustic fitted with an LR Baggs iBeam. Most agree that this is a very 'realistic' pickup that does a better than average job of capturing an acoustic guitar's natural sound and dynamics. Once the A1+ had enough to work with, it was able to demonstrate its true abilities.

The front end has ample clean headroom. The iBeam system produces a fairly healthy output level that's more than enough to push a regular mic preamp into overload. Even at maximum Gain the peak lights on the A1+ barely flickered, so we were able to keep the Gain control rear the top of its range. It's just as well, because background hiss becomes noticeable when the master Volume control is turned past two o'clock and this occurs regardless of the Gain control setting.

The DI output is clean and noise-free. Since the signal is taken straight after the preamp, the noise issues can probably be attributed to the power amp. The FX Level control also adds noise, whether the effects are activated or not. However, at the point where the noise becomes obtrusive the effect level is so high it wouldn't be appropriate for general use anyway.

Feedback is always an issue and the Anti Feedback feature is simple to operate. It works in conjunction with the Phase switch, so disengage Anti Feedback and increase the volume level until feedback begins to creep in, then engage the Phase switch to determine the setting that keeps feedback down. Carefully increase the volume to the brink of feedback, then engage Anti Feedback and slowly sweep through the frequencies. It's actually a notch filter, and when you have zoned in on the problem frequency the tendency to feedback should be reduced and you will be able to achieve a higher volume level. The problem frequency is likely to be disproportionately loud anyway, so we found that notching it enhances the sound quality.

Having two channels with a single phase control may be a potential pitfall. If you have two transducers in your guitar, they will need to be in phase with each other, and if you use an external microphone to augment an on board pickup, the same applies.

To test the microphone input, a small capsule condenser seemed appropriate and the phantom power from the A1+ was up to the task. Unfortunately neither of the preamp sections was able to provide enough gain for the mic, even when it was placed only inches away from the guitar. To hear the mic signal we were obliged to turn the master volume right up, making hiss obtrusive.

The onboard effects are very usable, with five reverb algorithms offering various tones of reverb and lengths of decay. Four chorus settings provide a range of speed and depth settings, and seven multi-FX presets combine modulation and pre-set delays with reverb. It's a pretty decent range of options so it's a case of suck it and see. You can also augment the onboard effects with external effects in the loop, or ignore them completely.

Used in conjunction with a decent active pickup system, the A1+ is perfectly capable of sending clean, loud and musically pleasing sounds through both the DI output and the onboard drivers. The parametric Mid control is more likely to be used in conjunction with the Anti Feedback feature to notch out the howl around frequencies, but the Bass and Treble controls offer plenty of scope for very fine adjustments and the midrange dip switch provides yet more tone shaping

Verdict

Laney has ticked just about every box with this one, so the A1+ can be adapted to work with a variety of pickup systems, mics or a combination of the two. The amp can be tilted back to fire upwards like a monitor wedge, or even be mounted on a speaker stand. The microphone input can be used for a vocal mic as well as a guitar mic, and the auxiliary input with its dedicated level control makes the A1+ function almost like a portable personal PA system. Given that the A1+ isn't a very expensive amp, the features and the sonic quality are pretty impressive.

FINAL SCORE

LANEY A1+ ACOUSTIC AMP	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Versatility	**19**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**86%**

FACTFILE

Laney A1+

DESCRIPTION **80W solid state acoustic guitar amplifier with two fully independent channels. Made in China**
RRP **£299**

CONTROLS **Bass, Treble & sweepable Mid, anti-feedback notch filter, mid dip switch, effects loop, balanced DI output, auxilliary input, headphone socket, 16 DSP effects, phase switch, two jack/XLR inputs, phantom power (both channels), footswitch/ front panel muting**

DIMENSIONS **360mm x 300mm x 390mm**
WEIGHT **13kg/28.6lbs**

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Marshall
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50W acoustic amp with digital chorus and reverb, two inputs, microphone input with phantom power, 2x8" speakers with horn
RRP **£271**

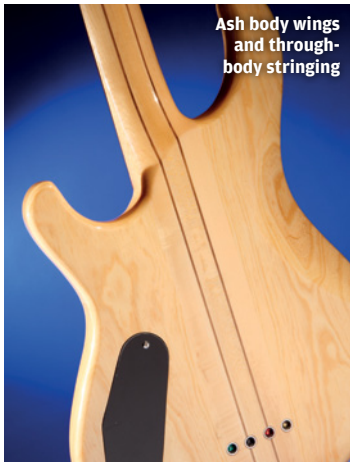
PRS
SE Kingfisher Bass

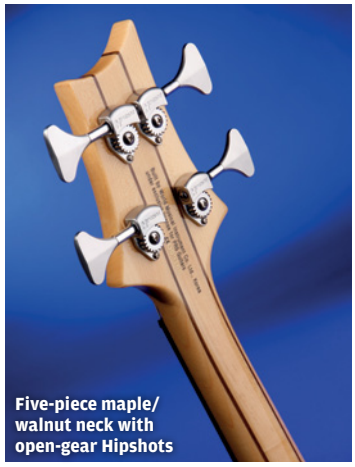
PRS has been making basses sporadically since 1987, but with the new SE models they're committed to the big time. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

PRS Guitars was established in 1985 by American luthier Paul Reed Smith. Smith built his first guitar while in college, and the quality of the finished article was the catalyst for what's become his life's work. Smith's big break came in 1981 when Carlos Santana borrowed one of his guitars to use on the *Zebop!* album. With this big-name thumbs-up, Smith took $300,00-worth of orders and established a company which has grown from 45 to 110 employees and now produces 700 guitars a month from the Stevensville, Maryland, USA factory, with a list of endorsees which includes Ted Nugent, Dave Navarro and fusion legend Al Di Meola.

PRS introduced the more affordable Korean-made SE line of guitars back in the mid-'90s, but it's taken until June this year for them to finally add a bass to the line-up. There are two basic models: the single-coil equipped SE Kestrel model, which has the control cavity front-routed and comes with a scratchplate for that traditional look, and the SE Kingfisher, the one we have for review this month.

It's a clever design – clean, stylish and subtle, and not planting its aesthetic flag too firmly in any one musical genre. The body outline isn't far away at all from that of the original PRS basses, but to our eyes the shape is less guitar-like and more classically bassy, with perhaps a touch more swoop to the bottom bout and cleaner lines throughout – a look further improved by the more refined positioning of the bridge and the simplicity of the control layout. The body is basically flat-bodied, but there's still that distinctive PRS scalloping inside the lower horn. It has a well-judged forearm chamfer plus a ribcage cut around the back, and taken as a whole it hangs together very nicely.


Ash body wings and through-body stringing


Five-piece maple/ walnut neck with open-gear Hipshots

The PRS SE Kingfisher has ash body wings and a through neck made of maple with two slim walnut stringers

What really catches the eye is the wood itself. The body is predominantly ash – PRS refers to it under the name of swamp ash – and its sweet grain patterning is illuminated by a natural gloss finish. There are two other colours available aside from natural: a deep transparent scarlet red and a dark transparent brown that PRS calls tortoiseshell. Both look great.

Flip the bass over and you'll see that it's got a neck-through-body construction, with the neck and the body's central section made up from three fat maple chunks separated by two slim walnut stringers. At the transition from neck to body, the smooth 'heelless' design makes higher register playing a pleasure.

The neck itself isn't super-slim but it strikes a good balance between feeling smooth and unobtrusive to play and offering some degree of supportive, even comforting, mass under the hand. The back of the neck is also gloss lacquered – no problem to many, but potentially a slight issue for the ➔

FACTFILE
PRS
SE Kingfisher Bass

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody bass. Made in Korea**
PRICE **£814.80**

BUILD **Swamp ash body, bolt-on five-ply maple neck with walnut stringers, with 24 medium nickel frets on a rosewood fingerboard. Hipshot HB6 tuners and Hipshot Trans Tone bridge with optional string-through. Chrome hardware**

ELECTRICS **Passive, with one PRS Designed SE 4B Treble humbucker (bridge) and one SE 4B Bass humbucker (neck). Two Volumes and one Tone control**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Natural, Scarlet Red and Tortoise Shell**
RANGE OPTIONS **SE Kestrel Bass with two passive single-coils, £778.80**

SCALE LENGTH
864mm/34"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 40mm
12th fret 57mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 22mm
12th fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 11mm
Bridge 19mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT
4.3kg/9.5lbs

CONTACT
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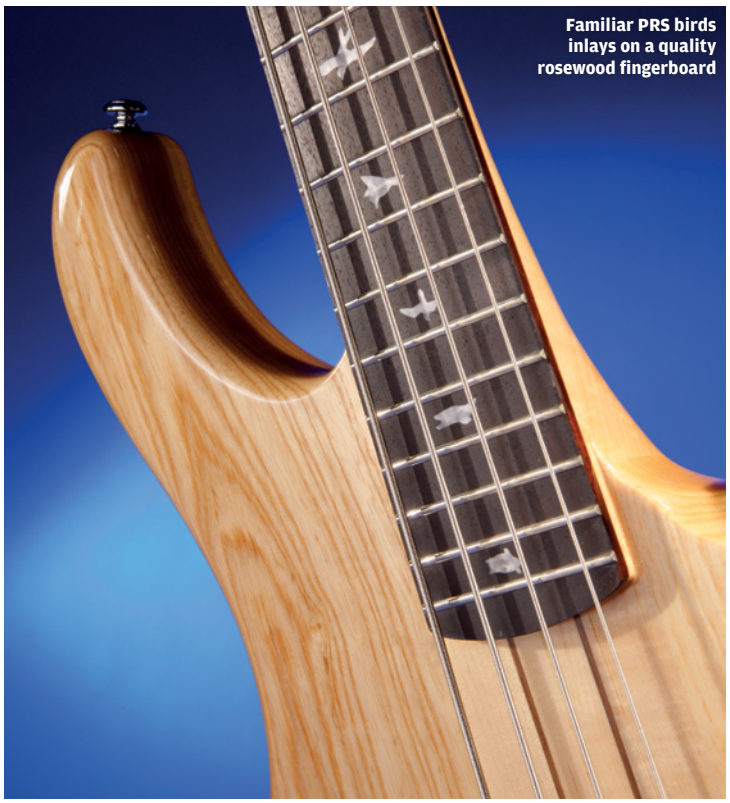
Familiar PRS birds inlays on a quality rosewood fingerboard

sweatier members of the club. The headstock is the pointy oblong long familiar to owners and fans of PRS guitars, and it slopes away from the neck for a good string break-angle. A set of Hipshot HB6 tuners line up two on each side, and provide an interesting visual detail, the tuning peg stems and visible gearing being shiny chrome, and the poles, the rest of the housing and the small, T-shaped buttons, being brushed chrome; very nice.

The nut is a black synthetic material and the fingerboard is rosewood, carrying 24 expertly-seated medium nickel frets plus the trademark bird inlays (instead of dot markers) which include representations of a peregrine falcon, a kite, a storm petrel and a sparrow. Some may have preferred the simplicity of dots, but the birds definitely underline the PRS heritage.

The Kingfisher comes with 45-105 rounds as standard

Hipshot bridge gives a top-loading option

For the bridge, PRS fits Hipshot's chunky chrome Trans Tone unit which offers either top-load or string through anchoring via the ferrules you can see on the back, and adjusting the action or intonation is, slightly unusually, an all-Allen key affair.

You may expect the forward-thinking PRS people to load the SEK with plenty of juice, but it's passive electronics all the way. This dictates a simple set of controls, two individual volumes and one master tone, and these are hooked up to a pair of fat-polepiece humbuckers, namely a PRS Designed SE 4B 'H' Treble unit at the bridge and an SE 4B 'H' Bass unit towards the neck.

Sounds

PRS makes its plans for the Kingfisher's sound very clear – they've aiming for what they call a 'distinct old-school character that delivers that huge "clacky" tone missing from some modern basses', with a 'high midrange growl that allows the bass to cut through the mix while holding down the band with its sweet warm fundamental tone'. We selected the most obvious starting point – both pickups, with the tone control on full – and discovered plenty of bottom end action with a pleasing growl, while the thinner strings have a generous amount of body and top-end informed clarity, with clean highs that open up nicely if you pop the G string. The 'high midrange growl' pointed out by PRS is certainly there, and they've gone all-out to nail that particular characteristic with admirable enthusiasm; it's crunchy and clear in the midrange, but it also has a hint of nasality and choke that some will like but others may feel has been just a tiny touch over-egged. Of course, this kind of frequency push does guarante clarity in a band mix and you have to commend their intention, but the prevailing sound of the twin-pickup setting does end up with a generous smear of, shall we say, sonic Marmite.

Still in twin-pickup mode, backing off the tone knob gives only one usable variation just before the woolly rumble that is full cut, and this takes the focus off the high mids a fraction, bringing a little thud to the party.

We do like the sound you get from soloing the neck humbucker: it's earthy with excellent thud and an aggressive growl, and it's tighter and more solid in the midrange than you'd expect. Highs are crisp and clean which means thinner strings have plenty of body but this is married to a solid, sharp attack. This funky edge can be nudged into standard rock'n'roll territory by knocking back the tone knob.

The bridge pickup's level is well-matched to that of the neck pickup, and on the lowest three strings the combination of burpy gurgle and a higher harmonics count conjures up a fine funk tone, although the G string is a touch too bright and nasal to fit in perfectly. However, rolling back the tone softens this edge and integrates the G string with the others very nicely.

Verdict

The Kingfisher is very well put together with PRS's typical attention to detail, and it's also a pleasure to play, with exceptional seated balance and also lying equally comfortably over the shoulder. Tonally, the individual neck and bridge pickup sounds are good, and we'd especially commend that solid, punchy and earthy bridge pickup. It's also a fine-looking thing, so if you want a passive through-neck four-string with humbuckers and a distinctive sound, give it a spin.

FINAL SCORE

PRS SE KINGFISHER BASS	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**14**/20
Value for money	**15**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**80%**

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Photo by Karen Johnson

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ASHDOWN

MAG Rootmaster RM-220 Bass Amplifier

The 220W Rootmaster head has a trad solid-state power section and all-new drive, compression and sub bass features. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

Ashdown has been hitting us with good stuff in terms of bass amps and bass pedals for over 17 years. There are many reasons for their amps' success, but one of the main ones has to be that bass players from pro to amateur level actually want to use them. On top of that, they've always taken extra care with the visuals; the styling is classic and characterful without really shouting and screaming about it. The company has recently re-designed the MAG range, from which we've purloined the handsome little Rootmaster 220 head for this month's amp review.

Made in China, the Ashdown RM-220 offers 220W of solid state power into a single Speakon socket. It has a black steel jacket and stands 88mm high on four rubber feet and 313mm wide and 225mm deep, with a slightly chunky (by modern micro-head standards) payload of 7.5kg/16.5lbs (the more powerful MAG RM-420 head has a Class D power section and weighs 4kg/8.8lbs). Controls-wise, there's an array of black knobs on the lower part of the two-tone front panel, comprising Input (with associated Shape and EQ in/out buttons), Compression (with in/out switch), Drive (distortion level, with in/out switch), Sub (controls the level of the trademark octave effect), Output and Line Mix (line in signal volume). The cream-coloured top row is all about EQ, with +/- 15db on offer from Bass (100Hz), 240Hz (confusingly, actually 340Hz), Middle (660Hz), 1.5kHz (actually 1.6kHz) and Treble (7kHz shelving). Aside from an input jack socket and Speakon Speaker Out, there's also an FX loop, a socket for a footswitch (which is not supplied) and, unusually in this form, DI Out jack sockets. These are joined by a mini-jack to connect your music player or drum machine for practicing purposes.

Sounds

With no EQ-ing, the RM delivers an accurate representation of your bass's acoustic tone – always a fine starting point – and if you're looking for the scooped mids sound, there's a suitably smooth and glassy version available via the Shape button. The EQ is robust and musical and sensibly attenuated, so when you dial in Bass the degree of fat rumble you attain is big but not overpowering, and it doesn't kill note definition. Use 240Hz for a punchier result or to shore up a weak-sounding tone with plenty of snappy impact, and add middle boost for sharper note edges and more aggression: perfect for those eighth-note basslines when you need to cut through or just for a bit of nastiness. Boosting all three tone controls about a third produces a wicked finger-funk tone that's tight and snappy with plenty of body.

The 1.5kHz knob provides the antidote to an overly dark or muddy sound, all the way up to about two-thirds boost, where excessive clank takes over; there's not much in the way of burpy gurgle on offer but if you want tight, funky and contemporary, it's certainly here. The Treble control offers plenty of cut and bite but, again, even on full boost it doesn't induce excessive amounts of tonal flotsam.

Of the other features, the compression is natural-sounding and transparent, the drive knob awakens a chocolatey fuzz monster, and blendability renders it useful, as is the Sub feature – a decent octaver that'll add synthiness or thickness if needed.

Verdict

The RM-220 is a good little amp presented in a stylish but unfussy way. It's compact and practical, and the EQ is well thought-out and sensibly attenuated to deliver plenty of practical tonal variations; on top of that, the additional features should all find some regular places in your playing. The construction is rugged and this amp should comfortably withstand the sort of abuse likely to come its way... and it's also splendid value for money.

FINAL SCORE

ASHDOWN MAG ROOTMASTER RM-220	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Versatility	**17**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**85%**

FACTFILE

Ashdown MAG Rootmaster RM-220

SPECS **Single-channel 220W solid state amplifier. Made in China**
RRP **£299**

CONTROLS **Input (with Shape and EQ in/out buttons), Comp (with in/out button), Drive and Sub (both with in/out button), Bass, 240Hz, Middle, 1.5kHz, Treble, Output and Line Mix controls. In, FS-2 Out (footswitch not supplied), DI Out and FX loop jack sockets, Line In mini jack socket, Speaker Out Speakon socket**

RANGE OPTIONS **Head: 420W RM-420, £399. Combos: RM-C115-420, 420W 1x15", £499; RM-C210T-420, 420W 2x10", £525; RM-C112-220, 220W 2x12", £399. Cabs (all with tweeters): RM-115T, 250W 1x15", £199; RM-210T, 350W 2x10", £229; RM-212T, 300W 2x12", £269; RM-410T, 650W 4x10", 8 ohm, £299; RM-414T, 4 ohm, 650W 4x10", £299**

DIMENSIONS **88mm high inc. feet, 313mm wide, 225mm deep**
WEIGHT **7.5kg/16.5lbs**

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The Crying Bass has a buffered bypass and draws 18mA, but needs an adaptor capable of supplying 50mA

ELECTRO HARMONIX
Crying Bass Wah/Fuzz pedal

Companies like Sola Sound made combination wah/fuzz pedals in the early '70s, and it looks as if the breed is not dead yet. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

Since 1968, EHX have been providing us with clever little devices that add colour, dimension and mayhem to guitar and bass sounds. The last piece of EHX kit we reviewed, the Deluxe Bass Big Muff Pi (May 2012, Vol 24/8), was one of the best affordable distortions we've come across, so we're delighted to get our hands on the Crying Bass pedal, EHX's latest offering designed for bass players.

The CB is a dedicated bass guitar fuzz/wah pedal, part of EHX's Next Step Effects series, a solid metal unit that from above looks like a standard wah but is actually a sealed box with 'tilt-back' slot cut out of bottom at the back and a fixed metal plate with rubber tread/grip that overhangs the front by 50mm. So, no stomp switch and no rocker pedal to control the wah effect? No, because operating this devious little beast is a question of rocking and rolling... well, maybe just rocking, to be more precise.

So, to activate, press down on the front of the pedal and let it come back to flat. If the red EHX logo is illuminated, you're in business. Press with your heel and see-saw it downwards (courtesy of rock-back slot) for wahification, which you can have alone or with added fuzz, courtesy of the recessed rotary level control on the side of the unit. Next to this is a Low Pass Filter Volume control which enables you to retain, remove or add bottom end, and a Calibrate button which EHX recommend be employed whenever you use the CB on a different surface. This sounded very much like engaging in a largely unnecessary and complicated process, but proved a doddle. Simply place the CB on aforementioned virgin flat surface, press and release said button, then rock back and press and release the button once more. This sets the toe and heel position which, in turn, subtly alters the sweep of the effect where necessary. You need to do this within seven seconds, or the function disables.

Sounds

Igniting the effect involves a far subtler foot movement than you'd imagine, so when you master it (which takes about three tries) there's no chance of it toppling over during a gig. The wah is gurgly with a throaty edge and not too bright sounding; operating the pedal as easy as a normal wah, bar some minor complaints from your Achilles tendons, but it does suck much of the bottom from your basic sound. This isn't a problem with the LPF – we found dialling it to about 6 with our active-powered review bass was the perfect antidote, and pushing it further created a sound with fat bottom and crunching, aggressive highs providing by the wah's 'up' setting. The CB also functions solely as a distortion pedal if you don't wobble it, the level control allowing decent blend options between clean note and spitting, spiteful fuzz with a chocolatey feel to the core of the note. Combining this with the wah is a bit too uncultured for an authentic Hendrix sound, but it's great fun to just wail away.

Verdict

The Crying Bass has a good wah sound and a very passable fuzz sound, and being able to re-inject lows into your effected tone plus having the ability to balance clean and effected sounds are real plus points. It's more versatile and easier to use than you might think, and it's a lot of fun – the physical element to turning it on and off means you feel a bit more in involved with the effect. Add to this an asking price that could be less than £60 and you've got a really good little unit, however you use it.

FINAL SCORE

EHX CRYING BASS WAH/FUZZ PEDAL	
Build Quality	**19**/20
Usability	**17**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

FACTFILE

Electro-Harmonix Crying Bass Wah/Fuzz Pedal

SPECS **dedicated bass guitar wah/fuzz pedal. Made in USA**
RRP **£79**

CONTROLS **Low Pass Filter Volume and Fuzz rotary controls, Calibrate button. True bypass, battery or 9V p/s (not included) operation**

CONTACT **ricks@ehx.com www.ehx.com**

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Rock'n'Roll HEAVEN

Gretsches, Hofners, Gibsons and more: join us on a guided tour of one man's stunning guitar collection, all inspired by great music of the '50s and '60s, with a ton of rarities – and all in knockout condition. Lars Mullen clutches the microphone

Guitar storage could be seen as something of a firstworld problem, but for those players whose love of music has led to a, shall we say, sizeable accumulation of instruments, then it's a matter that needs to be addressed – especially when you have as many fine large-bodied semi-acoustics as the subject of this month's *Private Collection*, a man who chooses to operate in these pages simply under the name of John.

'Somebody once told me that the best place for a guitar if it's not being used is in its case – and if I were a guitar, then I wouldn't want to be strung up by the neck and hung on the wall to fade and to get all dusty!' John says. 'All the guitars in my collection are the closest I can find to mint condition for their age, and they really have to be kept stored away in their cases, but I make sure that I bring them all out regularly to play on a rota I've drawn up.'

An extremely rare Bigsby 'True Tone Changer' B bender

John has built up his guitar knowledge both by spending time with other guitar fans and also by perusing every available book on the subject. 'I've learnt a lot by talking to experienced collectors, but probably more by reading reference books on guitars,' he says. 'I love researching the guitar I have and reading some of the fantastic stories about the players. Sometimes you find tiny gems that were meaningless at the time but are now a part of history.

'For example, I'm a total Buddy Holly fan. He's recognised as one of the first high-profile players to use a Strat – when people saw him holding one on the front of the album *The Chirping Crickets*, they didn't know what this guitar with all the horns was. I was enthralled when I

found out that one of the Crickets was on his knees in front of Buddy, getting ready to flick the selector switch on his Strat to the bridge position when he took the solo in *Peggy Sue*. How cool is that for information?!'

However, John doesn't only have a guitar library stuffed with books on the guitars owned by the players who have influenced him – he's also spent a huge amount of effort in assembling the instruments themselves. 'My favourite era for guitar music is between 1955 and 1965, and the guitars I'm most interested in are Gibsons, Fenders, Hofners and Gretsches,' he says, 'and Gretsches are special to me because of Eddie Cochran.

'I think Eddie Cochran was underrated. He was an incredibly versatile musician. On many of his recordings he played bass and drums, and he was a session player long before he was a name recording artist himself... he was part of the Cochran Brothers – who were not related – with Hank Cochran in 1955. Songs like *C'mon Everybody, Somethin' Else* and *Summertime Blues* really summon up all the frustration of teenagers in the '50s and '60s. He was also an amazing guitar player. I'm not the world's greatest guitarist myself, and what's wonderful about Eddie is the amount he did with just a few open chords and straightforward rhythm patterns.'

Our main picture on the opposite page shows John's Eddie Cochran tribute collection – including a framed picture which contains the original artwork that was used for two of his albums. 'The guitar on the right is a Gretsch 6120 just like Eddie's,' John assures us. 'This is the thirteenth 6120 produced in 1954, and is one of a very small batch made with just 21 frets for the reps to take around the shops... the later models had 22 frets. This is the actual guitar featured in Edward Ball's book on the Gretsch 6120, *The History Of A Legendary Guitar*. Eddie Cochran's guitar was a '55, but mine is the only '54 I've ever heard of, complete with the leather strap – with no missing jewels in the buckle!

'The 6120 on the left is a rare one. It has a B Bender in the form of a foot pedal that connects to the B string on the Bigsby unit on the guitar via a cable. With careful manipulation of the onboard Bigsby and the pedal, you can create some amazing pedal steel sounds. Both these 6120's are in very good order – some of the gold plating on the hardware has worn off, which is expected, but the orange colour is still as bright as ever. I'm still searching for a G-brand Gretsch Round-Up, a model which I also adore.'

John was weaned on British TV music shows of the '50s, especially *Oh Boy!* and *Boy Meets Girls*... events dominated, guitar-wise, by the Hofners available at the time.

'Hofners are a brand I still adore with the utmost passion,' John admits. 'They were the first guitars of so many iconic players – Ritchie Blackmore, David Gilmour, the list is

Two 1960 Hofner Club 60s – John's long-owned sunburst with original-order Bigsby and an all-original blonde

Two '50s Hofner Presidents, one electric and one acoustic, and a '58 Hofner Congress

L-R: Thinline Committee and acoustic President and Committee

'Hofners were the choice of early British rockers like Tommy Steele, Marty Wilde, Vince Eager, Vince Taylor, Terry Dene and Cliff Richard'

endless. But in my era, Hofner guitars were the first choice for early British rockers like Tommy Steele, Marty Wilde, Vince Eager, Vince Taylor, Terry Dene and Cliff Richard, the guys who were discovered between 1956 and 1962, playing in a small cellar below the 2i's coffee bar at 59 Old Compton Street in Soho in London, which is now generally regarded as the birthplace of British rock'n'roll. If the 2i's were still open, I'd be a regular customer... but alas, all we have for now is a plaque on the wall.

'But anyway, I had a Hornby Dublo electric train set with all the extras, and I felt sure I could get a good price for it, so my mother put a card in the post office window. I sold the train set straight away for £15 quid and went straight to the local guitar shop and bought a sunburst Hofner Congress. Not long after that I swapped it for a President, which in turn I traded in for a Hofner solidbody, not realising I wouldn't be able to hear it as I couldn't afford an amp... I had to rely on a pal with an amp for lessons and to hear my guitar at all!

'Eventually, in 1959, I settled on a Hofner Club 60 costing about 50 guineas, for which my mother signed the hire purchase agreement, and I worked on Saturdays to pay off the "drip" , as we called the repayments. I asked for a Bigsby vibrato and was told it would be half the price of the guitar, but when it arrived the letters on the embossed tailpiece were blacked out, which was something to do with the patent. The Bigsby added just 12 guineas on the price of the guitar, which was driven back in a car from Germany by the main agent!'

John's actual Club 60 is pictured on the previous page. 'It took a while to get here from the original day of the order, so it's a 1960 model with black lacquered body sides and neck, the broader headstock, and 'toaster' pickups,' he details. 'The red sunburst is still stunning – it hasn't faded at all. I can't stand to see guitars mistreated – maybe it's because my birth sign is Virgo!

'The blonde Club 60 with the original tailpiece is from the same date, and it's pristine. I bought this one not too long ago, and it really sums up the Club 60's deluxe spec – the higher quality flame maple veneer, the ebony fingerboard, the and detailed mother of pearl inlay in the binding, position markers and the headstock.

'The next group of Hofners include a semi-acoustic President with the toaster-type pickups, a blond acoustic President also from the late '50s, and a Congress from 1958, which was the basic model without too many frills and the same model I swapped the Hornby train set for. It's interesting to look at the different headstock designs.

'This next trio of Hofners include a late '50s Thinline Committee, again with toaster

A rare non-cherry Verithin, a narrow-headstock President and a semi-acoustic Committee with 'bar' pickups

Left, a modern Hofner Verythin; right, a '58 Hofner Committee

L-R: 1967 Gibson ES-125TDC, a cherry sunburst '63 ES-125TDC, and a '59 ES-225

Three-quarter scale Gibson ES-140 and a Gibson-made Cromwell

pickups, a brown burst acoustic President and an acoustic Committee in natural from 1959, as played by Billy Fury, who like so many stars from this period loved to be on album covers with his Hofner.

'Moving on, here's a Hofner Verithin from '63 which is a bit of a strange one with a natural finish instead of the flagship red. I've been all over it with a magnifying glass, including around the bound f-holes, and there's no sign that it's been scraped back to natural, so it's a mystery. Next to it is another late '50s President with a narrow headstock, and a '50s semi-acoustic Committee with the black single coil 'bar' pickups.

'I thought I'd round up the Hofners with a new-meets-old theme. On the right is a '58 acoustic Committee, beautifully inlaid with mother of pearl fingerboard markers, body binding and a gloriously detailed headstock, and on the left is a modern German-built Classic Verythin. This guitar is really stunning. It's made from the best tonewoods and comes with modern electronics – the tone controls also contour the humbuckers to emulate a single coil pickup.'

It's time to cross the virtual Atlantic ocean to look at John's impressive selection of Gibsons. 'I like the soft cutaways of the Hofner body profile, but when it comes to Gibson archtops, for me, it has to be the shaper Florentine profile,' he offers. 'Here are three with the shape I love so much – two ES-125TDCs, a sunburst '67 and a cherry sunburst '63, and a 1959 ES-225TD. I personally find the twin pickup versions of both these models much more desirable than the single-pickup ones... when you hear the clarity of a P90 on these thin-bodied guitars, it's just amazing.

'This ES-225 can deliver the lot. It's got those crystal-clear cleans straight into the amp, but it's also got enough output to drive the front end of an amp if you want. One of the prime examples is the rhythm guitar on the Buddy Holly records... that was Niki Sullivan of the Crickets playing his ES-225TD, the other guitar pictured on the sleeve of *The Chirping Crickets*. Another example would be that raw slide-based sound that George Thorogood had with the Destroyers, playing an ES-125.

'I love this little thin-bodied Gibson ES-140, which dates from the '50s. Primarily designed for children or guitarists with small hands, it's a fun guitar and basically a three-quarter size replica of an ES-175, with a short scale which makes it easy to play. With the output and tone of that single P90, though, it's anything but a toy guitar.

'If a cool archtop comes along then I'll always be interested. This Cromwell falls into the category of "other brands made by Gibson" and it was built between '37 and '39, during the Great Depression. It was basically a budget guitar with not that many frills, but it's still got that Gibson quality and it's a great jazz guitar with a big, warm sound. There have become fairly collectable and they look pretty cool with the oversized dot position markers and the centre stripe down the fingerboard.

'There's a mystery with some of the guitars from this era as to how they actually arrived in the UK. I find a hint of romance in the fact we know that several came over with American GI's during the Second World War and were left over here. This might be one of those, as people weren't importing Cromwells, to my knowledge.'

We're staying with Gibson, but moving upmarket. 'The Byrdland model was named after jazz guitarists Billy Byrd and Hank Garland, for whom the guitar was originally custom-built by Gibson,' John explains, 'but this archtop can handle most genres of music, from soft jazz to hard rock. ↔

Two Gibson Byrdlands, both from 1965 with the later Florentine cutaway

1976 Gretsch Super Chet (with details, far right) and a near-mint '52 Gibson ES-295

'I have two here, both dating from 1965. I've searched the world for my guitars, and these Byrdlands came from America. My method is to buy the nicest examples I could find from reputable sources and good collectors, but you still have to be careful in order to avoid the hoops and hurdles.

'While we're talking big-bodied guitars, I thought I'd bring in another Gretsch. This is a later one dating from '76, but what a beauty – a 7690 Super Chet. The Chet Atkins album *Finger Pickin' Good* has him playing the same model on the front cover.

'This stunning guitar was produced during Gretsch's Baldwin-owned period, and it has a maple body with a rounded cutaway and bound f-holes. It was available in stained walnut or autumn red, as seen here. The five controls – which include master volume and tone for each Filter'Tron pickup – are all small pots mounted on the edge of the Bakelite scratchplate. I think this guitar commands great aesthetic respect, and it's a real jaw-dropper for almost anyone's collection.

'I'm almost pleased to say that there are some very fine lacquer cracks just noticeable in the finish of this Gibson ES-295, also often known as the Scotty Moore model. I say "almost pleased" because if this was in mint condition then I would have been very suspicious, as it dates from 1952, the first year of production. Even the neck lacks any of the green hue that often accumulates from the acid in the player's sweat on the gold finish. It's the cleanest example I've ever seen.

'The last two semi's here today are this Gibson ES-345TD and a Gibson Trini Lopez Custom Deluxe. The ES-345 is another all-rounder that's proved the test of time; this one looks stunning in the walnut finish and of course it's got the six-way Varitone control.

'I mentioned earlier how I was a fan of the Florentine cutaway, so you can image how I feel about the Trini Lopez semi-acoustic signature model with twin cutaways! It's basically an ES-355 with a Fender-style headstock. Only two were built at the end of 1964; Trini Lopez himself had number one, and this is number two.

'The sunburst is in great shape, and it's fairly rare to find these models unfaded. I've been to a load of guitar shops in the USA, including the high-profile stores in and around Hollywood, and even the ones they have for sale have lost so much of the red in the burst that they've faded to what they call a watermelon colour. To me that means bleached out, and it's not acceptable.

'A lot of these guitars, even the semi-acoustics, are ideal as couch guitars. I don't really sit down and play with many big-bodied acoustics, but I do enjoy this unique Gibson Custom Shop Doves In Flight. It's not the off-the-shelf Dove, it was crafted by Ren Ferguson

A walnut-finish Gibson ES-345 and a pristine Trini Lopez Custom Deluxe

Gibson Custom Shop Doves In Flight model

Sandberg Clinic Tour with Holger and Reggie Worthy
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The rare and confusingly named ultra-deluxe The Les Paul had carved rosewood parts

when he was at Gibson's factory in Montana, and it's one of only five ever produced. The craftsmanship is remarkable, with the best tonewoods and some very intricate inlays, including doves on the bridge, scratchplate and headstock. Ren Ferguson is regarded by many as the world's finest flattop luthier. This model has additional bindings and intricate inlays, and each Dove In Flight scene on the fingerboard is different. It's so rare that there's hardly any information available on it.'

As John is clearly a huge fan of guitars with air inside them, we're slightly surprised when he begins to trot out an array of solidbodies – but by now it's less of a surprise to see just how exquisite his selection is.

'This first one I'll show you is actually called The Les Paul – not to be confused with the satin mahogany The Paul. This guitar was built in very small quantities and featured the talented work of luthier Dick Schneider. The natural finish is gorgeous, and the control knobs, the pickup surrounds, the selector switch ring and the pickguard are all carved from rosewood.

'This guitar has identification on the rear of the headstock indicating 13 May 1976, and it's number 20 of 77 built between 1976 and 1979; 59 of them were natural, and the rest were finished in wine red. Steve Howe has a wine red model, I believe, which is number 26. Mine's a hefty beast, though – it weighs 11.2lbs! Shortly after this, Gibson went over to using plastic instead of rosewood parts. At the time it was the most expensive Les Paul ever made, costing over $3000 back in 1976. I was talking to the guys in the Guitar Center in Hollywood a while ago and they said they hadn't seen one for over 20 years. Again, I have all the guitar books and I love researching my own guitars, especially if they are the actual ones featured in various reference books, and this one is featured in *The Les Paul Legacy* by Robb Lawrence.

'I have a nice pair of Gibson 25/50 Anniversary models here, both dating from 1979. These are great guitars with some cool appointments and hardware, including the TP6 fine-tuning tailpiece. They were built to celebrate 25 years of Les Paul's association with Gibson. The 50 indicated the number of years Les Paul had been in the music business.

'I originally went to buy just the tobacco sunburst 25/50, but the guy had another one in the natural finish, which is a bit unusual, so when he asked which one I wanted, I said "I'm having them both!"

'Staying with the Les Paul shape, this Gibson Spotlight Special is rather unusual. They were built in very limited numbers in '83. As far as the story goes, it was built from some of the finest left-over tonewoods when Gibson moved from Kalamazoo to Nashville. The body is constructed from mahogany with a really nice figured maple top built around a distinct walnut centre block. The pickups are '57 Classic humbuckers. The extra sustain is really noticeable, and it weighs in at 9.2lbs. This is a rare guitar with typical Gibson Custom Shop quality. I suspect most out there have been well played, so very few are in mint condition like this one.

'The Firebird is one of my favourite solidbodied Gibson models. The one I have is the '76 Limited Edition Bicentenniel model with the tri-coloured Firebird emblem on the scratchplate. The emblem normally fades over the years, but not this one. I've not played this one that much as I'd like to keep it pristine, but I am a fan of the mini-humbuckers – they've got a great sound.

'This beautiful SG Special was owned by a friend who bought it new at Selmer's in London's Charing Cross Road in 1967.

'At the time The Les Paul was the most expensive Les Paul Gibson had ever made, costing over $3000 back in 1976'

L-R: Gibson Spotlight Special and a pair of Les Paul 25/50 Anniversaries

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‘I can’t understand why people pay huge sums for certain solidbodies. It has to be their popularity, not the quality’

1976 Gibson Firebird Bicentenniel with its US-flag inspired scratchplate emblem

He used it on one album but suddenly became short of cash, so he sold it to me a year later and it’s been with me ever since. Like all my guitars it’s kept in the case but brought out on a rota basis, so they all get played. The cherry finish on this SG is still as vibrant as on the day it was born.

‘So you may ask why I have this 1970s Fender Telecaster – well, it’s just an iconic guitar, and when this one came up finished in see-through red with a rosewood fingerboard, again in really good condition, I had to have it. I bought it from a guy who said it was his “Sunday best” guitar.

‘The Telecaster goes well with these two Strats. They’re both 40th Anniversary models finished in a custom ruby colour and were built in Fender’s Custom Shop in Corona, California by Jay Black. They feature highly figured birdseye maple necks and fingerboards and gold hardware, and they’re now regarded as pretty rare. They were built to coincide with the Stratocaster book *Curves Contours And Body Horns*, and also the documentary and the concert of the same name in 1994. Only 40 were produced, one for each year, and I have numbers 19 and 30.

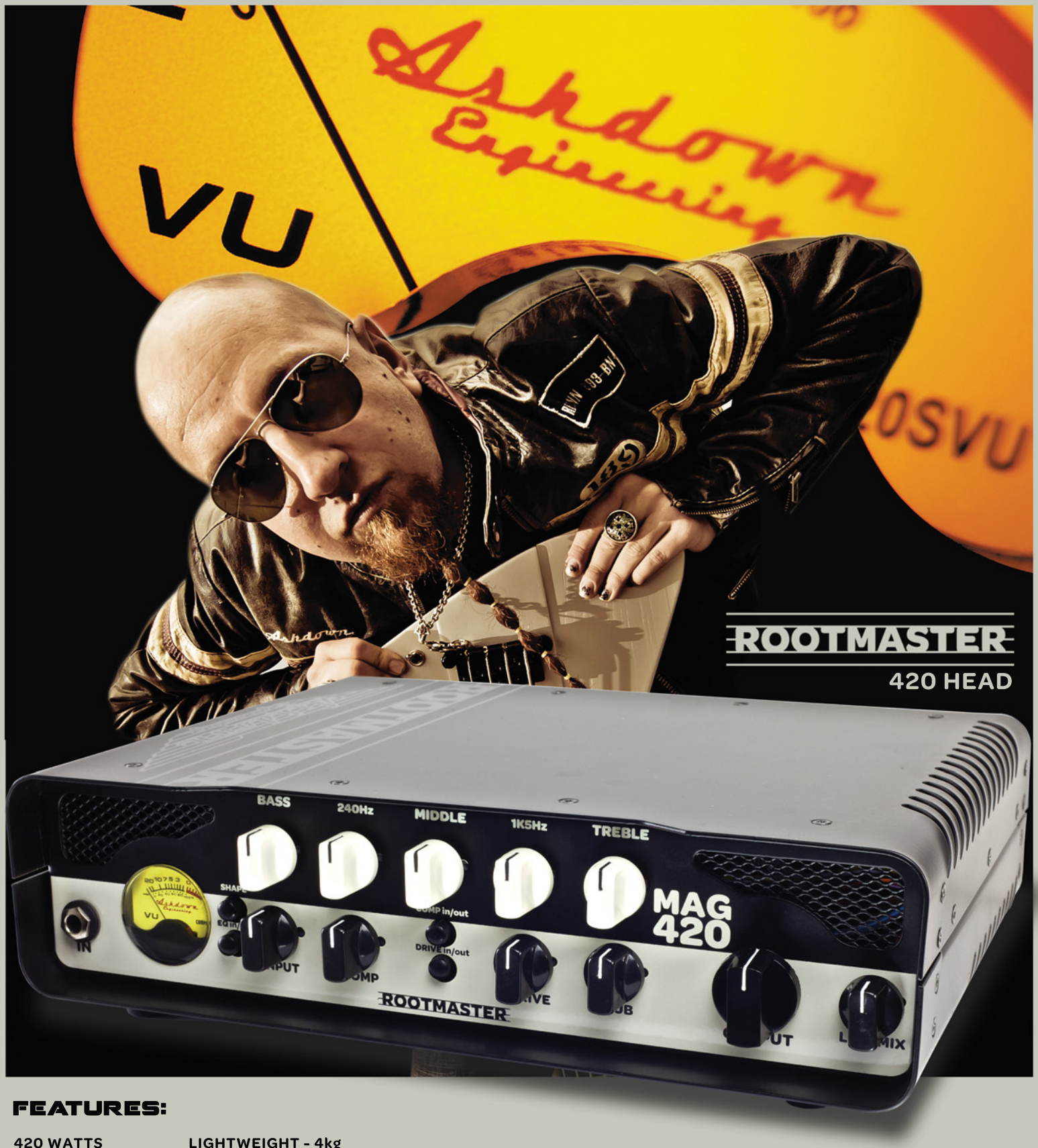
‘I do have a very, very soft spot for the Strat, which of course was played by Buddy Holly. Before I heard him, I was listening to the early Hollywood musicals and the American songbook writers like Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hart and Rodgers and Hammerstein. I still love all that stuff, the orchestrations were incredible... but when Buddy Holly came on the scene playing a jangly Strat, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. At the time, no one could work out how he played the lead parts – they were just so incredibly rhythmic.

‘Back then, nobody in this country had a Stratocaster; you couldn’t get hold of one, let alone afford one... as we now know, Cliff Richard brought the first one to the UK for Hank Marvin. When Buddy played at the 100th edition of the London Palladium TV show on March 2nd 1958, Lennon and McCartney were apparently glued to the television set, trying to work out how he played the guitar parts!

‘Although I love the solid-bodied guitars here, especially the Gibson ones with all the intricate work that went into them, I can’t understand why some people play huge sums of money for some solidbody guitars. Some basic Strats go for such large sums of money... it has to be for their popularity, not the quality or complication of the construction. I was reading in the September edition of *Guitar & Bass* where Bernie Marsden is saying this in a similar way. I couldn’t agree more with him when he says some of these high-end Gibson archtops often took three luthiers weeks to complete, when in that same time Fender would produce around something like 15,000 Strats. But I suppose it’s entirely down to the needs of the player or the collector!’

A stock ’70s Tele and a late ’60s SG Special with P90s

A pair of scarce 40th Anniversary Jay Black Custom Shop Strats



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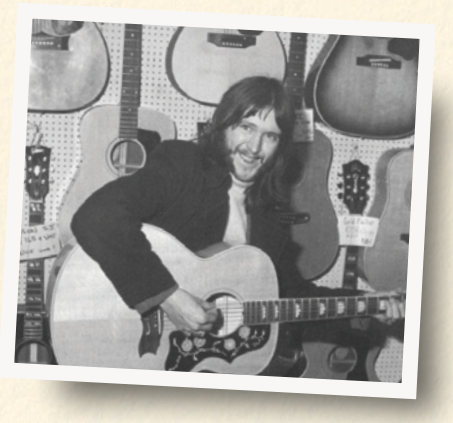


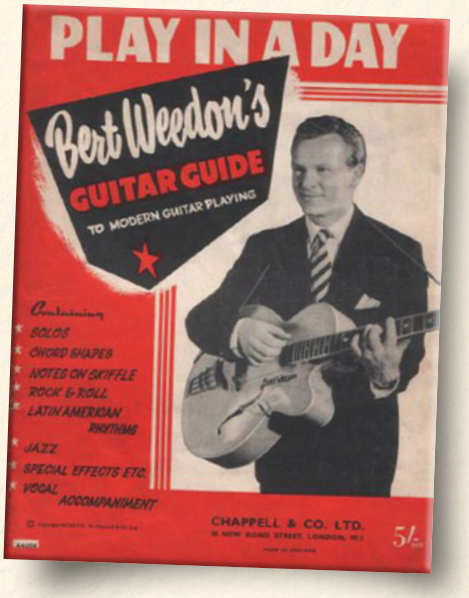
Guitars haven't changed much in 50 years, but they way we approach playing them certainly has. **Sid Bishop** wonders if we've lost something

Is learning to play the guitar too easy these days? I was idly chatting away with an old and much-valued mate recently when this very subject cropped up, and it raised a very thought-provoking point. He and I started learning guitar, and in the fullness of time began playing in bands, in the early '60s. By good fortune we both eventually gravitated to the same band, and our subsequent interwoven paths through our musical lives has persisted, on and off, until the present day.

When I first got infected with the guitar playing bug, it obviously became necessary to learn the instrument properly. I certainly could have opted for a teacher, a structured series of lessons, and in fact I recall my father strongly recommending that I do exactly that, but I thought that might be rather dull. I'd been told by others who had taken this route that such lessons often took the form of learning endless scales that didn't seem to have any purpose, and finger-blistering chords, most of which you'd never be likely to need in a million years. This apparently was followed by banging away at *Froggy Went 'A Courting* ad nauseam – not quite the 'rock and roll' I was hoping for. I was further reliably informed that this torture could easily take a year or more, at the end of which you might have learned very little, other than *Froggy Went 'A Courting* of course. The drop-out rate from such lessons was apparently quite high, and I should think, with the benefit of hindsight, that they might well have dissuaded far more guitarists than they created, so I decided to plough my own furrow.

Quite early on I'd discovered the joys of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, amongst others. These discoveries were made as a result of frequent visits to Dobell's jazz and blues record shop at 77 Charing Cross Road, or to Streatham's own Swing Shop, close to my home, both of whom stocked a stunning array of imported rock'n'roll and blues records.

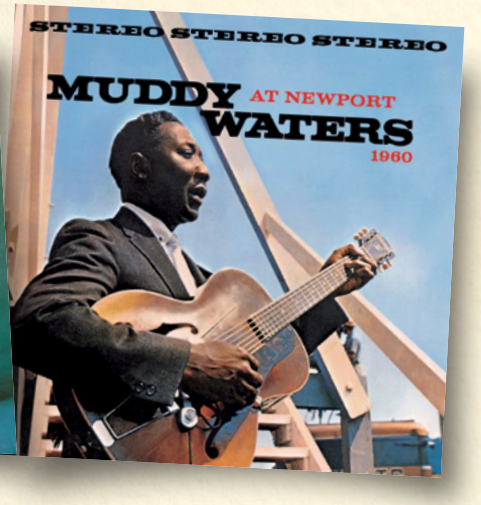
So sitting proudly in my bedroom with my Hofner Colorama and Selmer 'Little Giant' amp, I started to listen to Muddy and the Wolf and try and get my head, and my hands,



around this magic ethereal music that had winged its way to my very own bedroom from faraway places bearing such romantic names as Memphis and Chicago. In the mean streets of South London in the early '60s, it might

Sitting proudly in my bedroom, I started to try to get my head and hands around this magical music from faraway places like Memphis and Chicago

In days of yore, learning guitar meant the repeated application of stylus to vinyl



Sid's first forays were made on a Hofner Colorama and a tiny Selmer amp

as well have come from another galaxy.

Eventually I felt that I was making some headway, and was producing sounds getting close to those I was hearing on the records. This was mainly achieved by listening to a guitar passage of just a bar or two, then lifting the stylus, practising those few notes over and over until I'd got it right, then placing the stylus back on the record and doing the same with the next couple of bars, the final stage being to string them all together. On occasion I might encounter an especially complex run which I would get to grips with by the simple expedient of switching the record player to a slower speed, carefully picking out each and every note, then trying as many times as it took to play that run right at the correct speed. This was slow going, and perhaps I might have been better off going to the teacher after all, but Chuck and Bo were still calling so I continued doing things my way... and if there had been an easier method, I was not aware of it.

However, the point my old pal was trying to make back at the beginning of all this was that kids learning guitar these days have it easy. He might be right. My local music shop is stuffed with DVDs by today's and yesterday's legendary players, showing a viewer, note by note, how to play all their stuff. You can actually see what they're doing, not having to depend on guesswork or instinct. It's just like having a one-to-one lesson from your favourite guitarist, all taken at your own speed in the comfort of your own armchair. In addition, there's a wealth of material easily accessible on the internet. Back in our day we never even had an internet, or DVDs come to that.

Online tutorials: do they spell the end of finding your own paths around the guitar?

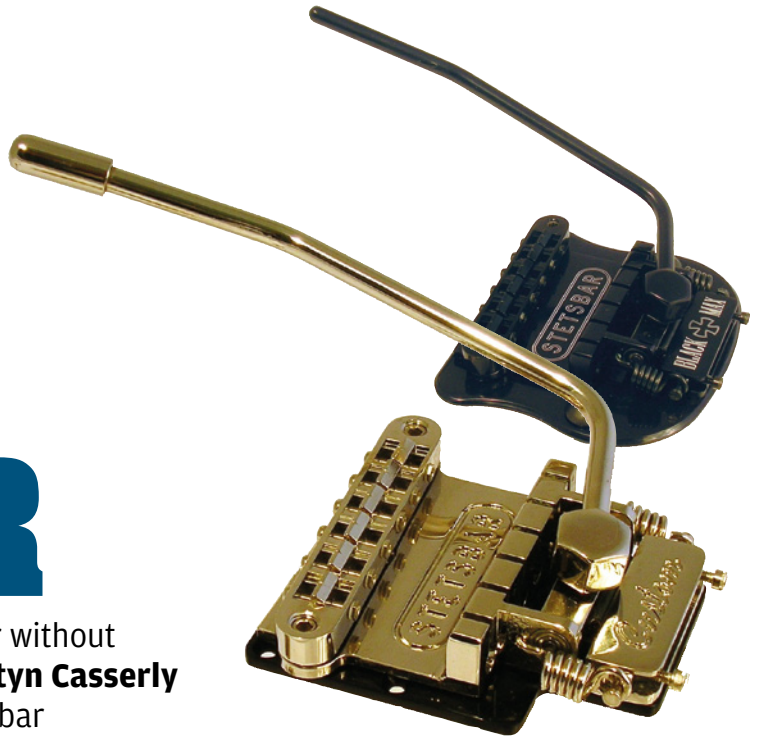
I'm further informed that you can get peculiar things called 'apps' which you can play on your own mobile phone or tablet thingy and then carry them everywhere you go. Unbelievable!

Does all of this produce better guitarists, though? At the risk of sounding churlish, it seems not. At the end of the day it all comes down to fingers on strings, it still takes time, and it still hurts. I would assume the whole process is quicker now, as a lot of the information for today's young aspiring guitarist comes in handy, pre-packaged, easily digested chunks. My best wishes go with you, but have a little respect for us old folks... we did it the hard way.

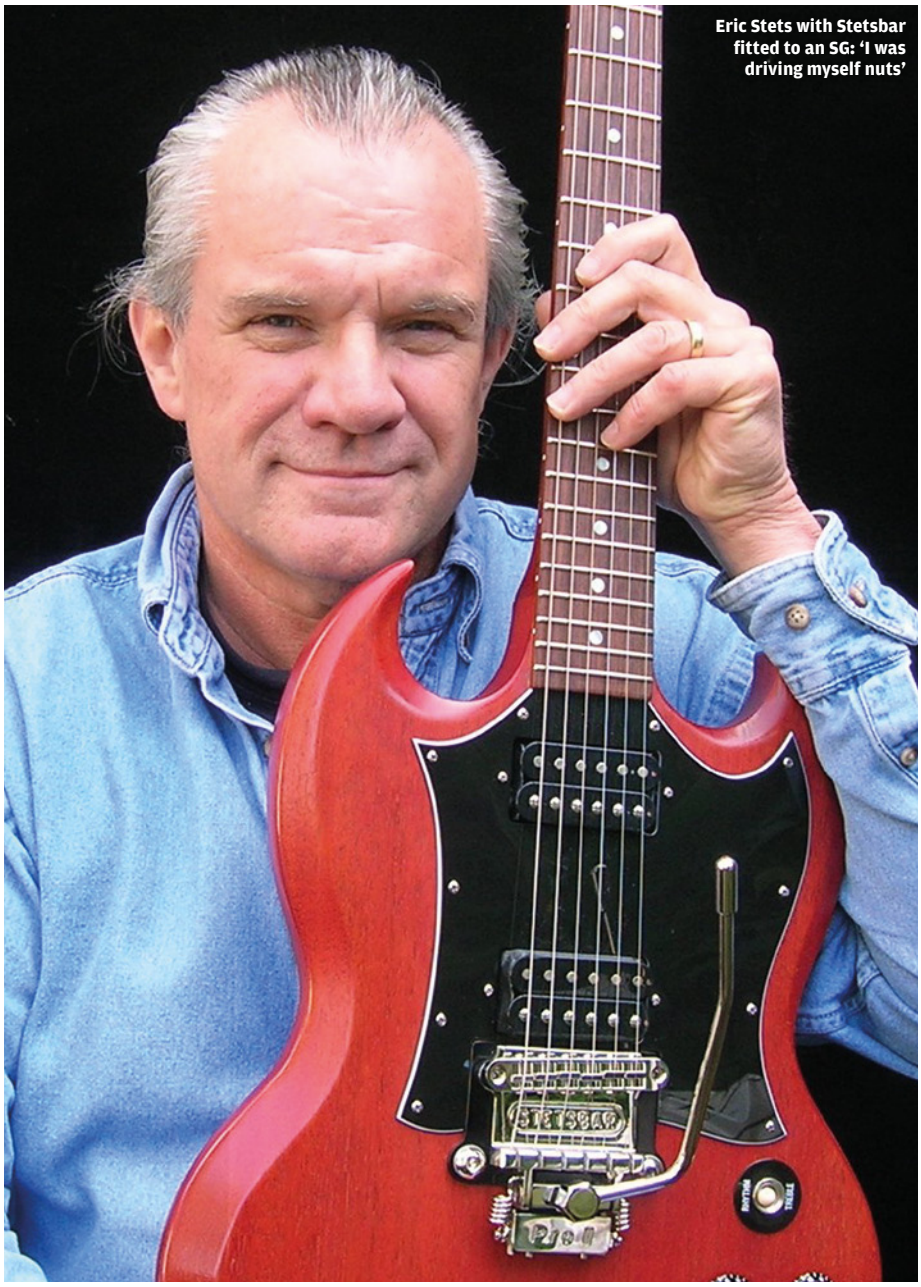
My local music shop is stuffed with DVDs. You can see what players are doing, not having t depend on guesswork or instinct

THE STORY BEHIND THE
STETSBAR

RAISING THE BAR



Inventing a vibrato that can fit almost any guitar without drilling a hole has always been a holy grail. **Martyn Casserly** meets a man who managed it, Eric Stets of Stetsbar



Eric Stets with Stetsbar fitted to an SG: 'I was driving myself nuts'

Coming up with innovative new ways to solve enduring guitar issues can be a thankless task. In an industry where the most popular modern instruments are practically identical to those from 60 years ago, it takes quite something to break through the ingrained image of the instrument that most of us hold dear. Thankfully there are some people out there who are made of the right stuff, and who are willing to go against the grain in search of designing a better mousetrap. One such man is Eric Stets, who for the past 25 years has been building the Stetsbar vibrato system in his New York state workshop, while musicians play his creations on some of the biggest stages in the world.

The genesis of his revolutionary system came from a simple problem he encountered while playing as an amateur musician – having to carry several instruments to each gig. 'One of the reasons I had multiple guitars was for vibrato,' Eric explains. 'My favourite guitar was my '71 Les Paul Custom, which did not have a vibrato on it.'

Thinking there must be a better way, Stets decided to explore the options of retrofitting a system on his beloved guitar, but found the alternatives on offer rather paltry. 'I decided to hunt down and see if anything was available other than a Bigsby,' continues Eric, 'because I haven't had success with the Bigsby... whenever I used one it seemed to be out of tune, and I found that problematic.

'After calling around to different music shops and searching, there really wasn't anything out there. So I thought, as a machinist, I should be able to come up with a design that fastens to the stop bar's bushes.'

Having plied his trade as a professional metalworker for around 30 years, and recently having started his own machining business, Stets began tinkering with designs when time permitted. But after developing the initial

Though pioneered on a Les Paul, there is now a Stetsbar to fit the majority of guitar designs. Above: The original Stetsbar Ad.

early prototypes, it became evident that the project would not be simple to complete.

'The problem I was experiencing,' explains Eric, 'was you cannot stretch and relax strings over a fixed bridge. The resistance at the point of the saddle on the bridge would resist the balance, so to speak, of the tension of all six strings versus the springs on the other side of the equation. They have to be equal for stability to be established. No matter how hard I tried, I kept coming back to the common denominator that the bridge must move with the strings, and to get that design compact enough under the bridge and above the guitar surface – because I was not going to plunge a router or a drill into that '71 Les Paul.'

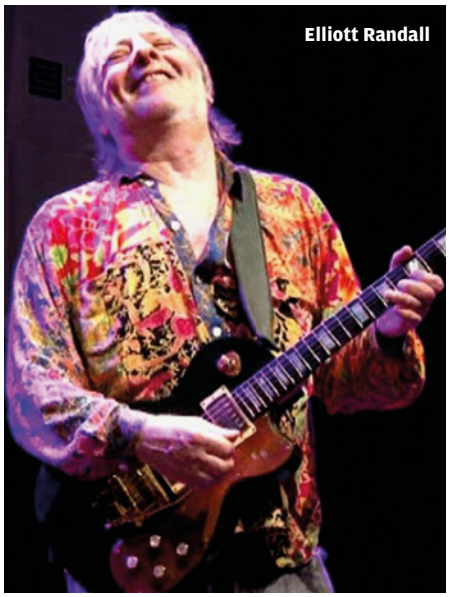
With the '80s drawing to a close, Stets continued exploring different ways to solve his vibrato problem. More after-hours sessions yielded promising units, but each one had issues. Slowly, the idea became something of an obsession. He knew the answer was there somewhere, even if it proved frustratingly elusive.

'I started driving myself nuts,' says Eric. 'I was hitting brick walls on the design. I'd wake up at four o'clock in the morning with "I've got it!" and I'd have to write it down or I'd forget it. Studying mechanical applications, linkages, gearing and movements, and seeing some of the brilliant mechanical designs that people come up with over the years and stealing their ideas...'

The real lightbulb moment came not in the middle of the night with a revelatory spark of inspiration, but instead through a rather more mundane, although still significant, event. 'I had a salesman call on me,' Eric recounts. 'This man sold products – bearing-related motion industry they call it – and he gave me a catalogue where I saw these little linear bearings. I said, golly, I'll betcha those will work in my design!'

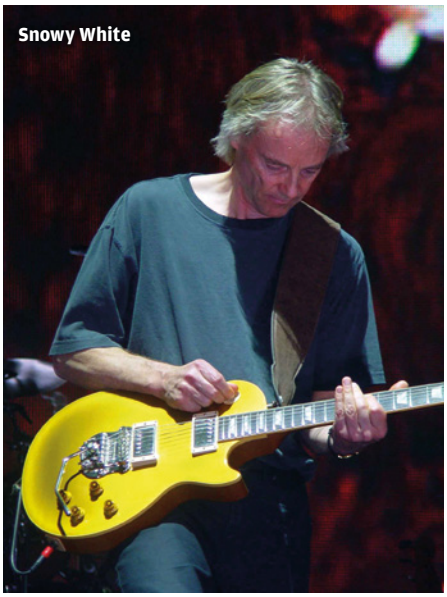
This humble item did indeed prove to be the final part of the puzzle. The micro-roller bearings meant he could finally build the system that would meet all of his stability and size requirements, and the Stetsbar was born.

In essence the unit consisted of a mounting plate which used the existing fixings on a guitar to attach it to the body. On top of this sat another plate that held a tunomatic-style bridge and the vibrato system. When the player pushed the vibrato arm down, the whole top unit slid forward on the micro-roller bearings, lessening the tension and therefore dropping the pitch of the strings. Springs ensured that the unit returned to the correct distance when the arm was released, and as this was a floating system the player could also pull the arm up to raise the pitch. The lack of friction points meant that tuning remained very stable, while also keeping string breakage to a minimum. Best of all it was a non-destructive design, ➔



Elliott Randall

Jan Akkerman



Snowy White

so it could be fitted to a vintage instrument such as a Les Paul or a ES-335 without the need to alter the guitar itself, ruining its resale value or its aesthetic beauty.

Following on from the great innovators in history, Stets put his money where his mouth was and went about fitting his vibrato system to his own Les Paul Custom, and the results were just as he'd envisioned. 'I was ecstatic!' says Eric. 'I was dancing! It was finally fully functional... I had the greatest thing since sliced bread. I was very excited. I looked at it and it was as ugly as sin, but it was great, it played, it stayed in tune... it worked.'

Taking the unit out gigging drew interested responses from fellow musicians, who particularly liked the idea of a system that could be fitted without damaging the guitar in any way. Stets knew he might be on to something, so he wisely decided to register the design at the patent office. 'After a year and a half and thousands of dollars, I found myself with empty pockets,' he recalls. 'So I thought, gosh, maybe I should make a few of these things, and maybe I can sell them.'

Balancing the demands of an existing business with this new fledgling venture meant that production was always kept to a modest level. This suited Eric, as it allowed him time to keep refining the design. News spread by word of mouth among local musicians, and before long Stets was also advertising in guitar magazines and even making an impromptu appearance at a NAMM show.

'My first experience with NAMM was the winter show in Anaheim, where I couldn't see myself affording a booth,' Stets explains. 'So I did what I was told not to do, and that was to bring my product in a little briefcase and get in line and talk to people and get it exposed. I walked my legs off. It wasn't too comfortable – I was in a serious accident in 1984 and I had extensive leg and foot injuries, so it was a real challenge. But it was exciting... seeing all the latest instruments, amplifiers and effects, I felt like a kid in a candy store. It was as if I was in the Land of Oz.'

Eric's '71 LP Custom, which served as the test mule for his invention

'It wasn't a handsome unit, because I was looking at it as an engineer. I needed to put the art side into the design to make it more pleasing to the eye'

While NAMM didn't result in an instant boost to the Stetsbar brand, it did help more people become aware of the idea and its possibilities. 'I got a lot of "Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's nice" responses,' says Eric, 'but there were some people who saw a value in it. I wasn't really prepared at the time if a distributor had said "I like that, I want to order a thousand units a month".'

One person who did see the potential of Stetsbar was Peter Miller, who ran the UK distribution company Madison and Fifth. Peter takes up the story...

'I used to travel to NYC on business about six times a year. Waiting for my flight at JFK I picked up a copy of *Guitar Player* and noticed a classified ad for Stetsbar. Back in the UK I called Eric, and bought one. Having fitted it to a Les Paul and put it through its paces, I just thought it was a perfect product – much better than any other trem I'd played. I called Eric and asked him if he had any European

The Stoptail model solves the problem of fitting a vibrato to an archtop – all without a single hole being drilled

L-R: Stetsbars for a Fender Strat, a Gibson Les Paul and a Fender Telecaster

Early Stetsbar in gold; black and chrome are also available

Stetsbar make vibratos for both trem and non-trem Strats

distribution and he said 'No'. So, on my next US trip I went up to meet him, and we spent a day getting to know each other and the partnership really started there.'

Working with Miller, Eric set about reshaping the unit into something that would be more palatable to the general guitarist. 'It wasn't a handsome unit at all,' Stets admits, 'I was looking at it basically as a mechanic, designer, machinist, engineer – it worked, what else should I need to do? Well, I needed to put the art side into the design, to make it more pleasing to the eye.

'I thought we could replicate the body shape of a guitar for the mounting plate, but we found that there were so many different body shapes that if I tried to copy one shape then it didn't look right on another. With the help of Peter, exploring ideas, we decided to go with more of a geometric shape that would be more applicable on any guitar.'

Having based the initial mechanical design around the Les Paul, Eric was encouraged to discover that the relationship between the spacings of Gibson's stop bar and bridge had actually been adopted by most manufacturers, meaning that his unit was compatible with a huge range of instruments. New designs for Fender Strats and Teles followed, excellent reviews began to appear in the music press, and with European distribution spreading the net even further Eric had to get himself a passport for the first time so he could travel to meet some of these new customers.

Ever the engineer, though, he continued to find ways to improve his creation. 'I wanted additional functions,' he explains. 'Maybe I wanted to shape the arm a little different, maybe put more adjustment in the bridge kind of thing, you know. Just improvements, from that point.'

The Stetsbar Pro II became the fulfilment of his work. Released in 2009, it featured a new Floating Lock which gave the player a choice of having the standard full floating Stetsbar system or locking it for 'down only' operation. Production was moved from the workshop in West Seneca, NY, to the factory in South Korea that manufactured the original Floyd Rose. This enabled the company to fulfil the many new orders while also offering customers a lower price.

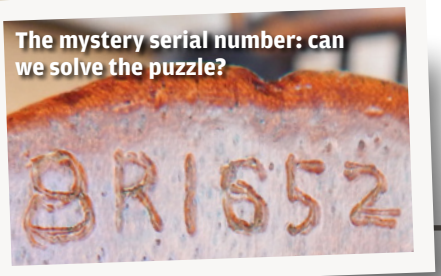
Stetsbar also picked up an impressive range of endorsees, including players such as Jan Akkerman, Randy Bachman, Snowy White... and Elliott Randall of Steely Dan fame. 'Without doubt, it's my absolute favourite vibrato handle,' states Randall. 'Why? Because of its sensitivity, nuance, its totally unique design, and the uncanny ability to actually keep the guitar strings in tune amidst all the action. I was introduced to Eric Stets by a mutual friend and within minutes I felt confident that not only had I discovered a uniquely superior product, but that I'd made a new friend. There is a reason he is becoming a legend. It's well-deserved. For me, Stetsbar is unquestionably a 5 out of 5. Or maybe even a 6 out of 5! Stunning.'

Now, a quarter of a century after he first started building prototypes, Eric Stets has achieved the kind of longevity that has proven impossible for so many other innovators in the guitar industry. His small company has survived two financial recessions, the explosion of low-price instruments that make it easier to afford guitars for different purposes, and all while continuing to grow and refine its product. It's been quite a ride, and he's learnt many a lesson along the way, but he's never lost the passion for playing that started him on the journey in the first place.

'It's really been a challenge,' he concludes, 'and it's been a wonderful experience. It's afforded me a number of things that I never thought that I'd get to do outside my humble little shop. It affords me to buy a lot of different guitars, and I'm gonna find one out there one day that I can really play well!'

Returning From Exile: Keith & Mick's Les Paul

Any original Les Paul sunburst is a special and rare guitar, but one steeped in the history of two great players is exceptional indeed. **Steve Clarke** gets the chance to disassemble a classic...



The mystery serial number: can we solve the puzzle?

Northern Guitar Show, Haydock, Sunday May 18 2014

I haven't been to any guitar shows for several years and didn't really know what to expect, so when the Northern Guitar show in Haydock was announced, I got there early and when the doors opened made a beeline for the spares sections as I go through lots on a daily basis. I was also looking forward to catching up with my *G&B* colleague Phil Harris, particularly as I knew he would be doing a set with the Greenie Les Paul, a guitar which is rarely seen in public these days.

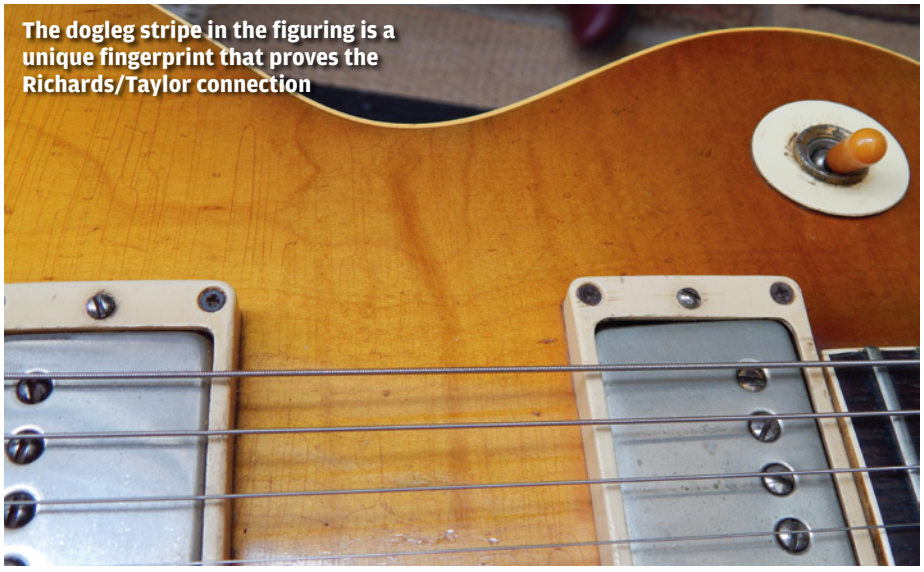
When Phil came onto the stage he gave everyone a guide to the guitars behind him including the Black Les Paul Custom that once belonged to Paul Kossoff and the Kossoff sunburst Les Paul that has featured in many articles. What captured my interest, though, was a Les Paul placed behind Phil on the stage that he had not introduced nor referred to. Phil's set was fantastic; he's a great player with wonderful feel and technique, and his enthusiasm for talking guitars and the stories he tells are mesmerising.

After telling us about the Peter Green and Gary Moore Les Paul he was playing, Phil announced that another surprise guitar had arrived unexpectedly. 'Wow – this is the Les Paul that Keith Richards and Mick Taylor once used. I can't believe this!' Phil said. He then picked up the guitar and played *Johnny B Goode*.

After the set was over I went to speak with Phil who was chatting to the owner of the guitar. Phil introduced me to the guitar's owner and then,

The hole on the back indicates that someone fitted a strap button there

Steve Clarke meets a legendary guitar


The dogleg stripe in the figuring is a unique fingerprint that proves the Richards/Taylor connection

while he dealt with questions from the crowd, I couldn't resist asking the owner if there was any chance I could do a review of the guitar. We exchanged phone numbers and agreed to make another contact after the show.

Barely 24 hours passed before my eagerness got the better of me and so I called for a chat. The owner was incredibly knowledgeable about the guitar's history and told me it was purchased 30 years ago for the princely sum of £1400 just two weeks after Mick Taylor had sold it to a London guitar shop. The owner was only told about the guitar's pedigree once the cash had been handed over! The guitar was probably first purchased in Los Angeles, and was used on *Exile On Main St* and also on the Stones' 1972 American tour. Mick Taylor used it much later, up until the early '80s, and it appears to have made an appearance when Mick collaborated with Bob Dylan.

After looking at pictures of Keith Richards and Mick Taylor it became clear that this was indeed the guitar, authenticated by the very distinctive pattern in the maple between the rear and front pickup. These days, with advent of YouTube, there are clips online of tracks such as *Bye Bye Johnny* with Keith Richards playing the Les Paul. At this point in the guitar's history there was more red in the colour, but it has since faded. There's also a picture in existence of Keith Richards and the guitar, leaning against an Ampeg.

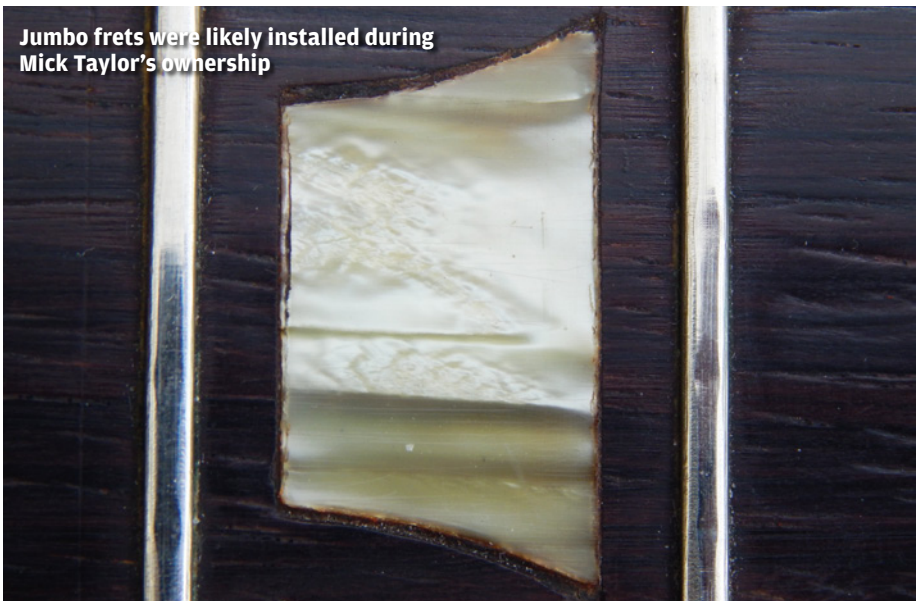
It's a sad fact that it's so very rare to see anything like this guitar nowadays, as most of the guitars belonging to our heroes end up like gold, held in vaults as an investment, never seeing the light of day, while others are often stolen, re-sprayed and sold. To chance upon a guitar with this much history is amazing – and to get the opportunity to review it is just a dream come true. Having arranged a day two weeks later, I arrived at the owner's house and the moment came for me and the guitar to really shake hands.

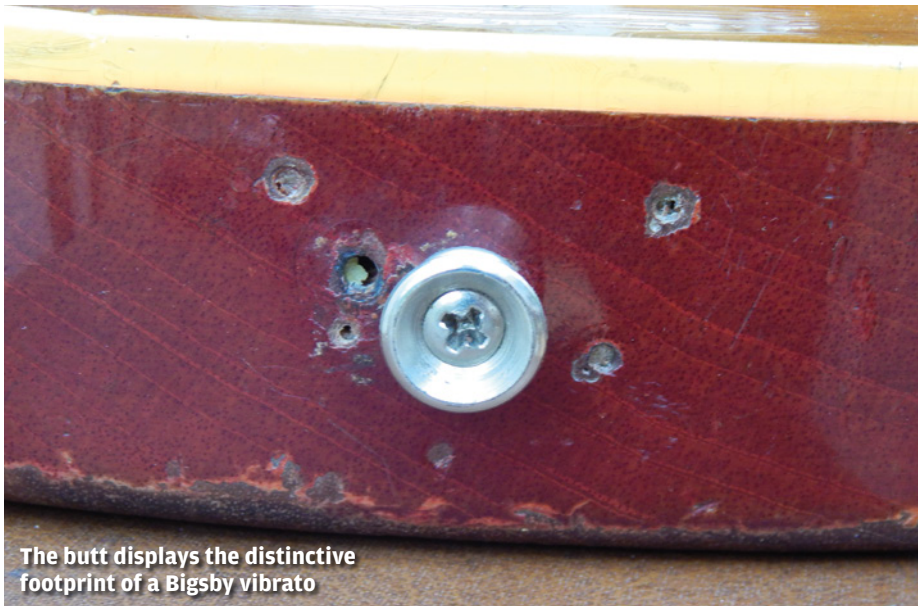
Meeting the Keith/Mick LP

Sitting innocently on its stand this Les Paul is a heart-stopping sight, and you can't help but be struck by its good condition. Handed the guitar for the first time, my forensic head overrides my heart and I start to focus on detail. The weight of the guitar prompted me to ask for some scales; the weight is about 8.5lbs, and it's very comfortable to hold. The Honduras mahogany body and neck has a colour that's a faded reddish orange, and the years have been kind as there's no buckle wear as you might expect from a guitar of this pedigree. Sure, there are plenty of knocks and dents, but the lacquer on the back has held up well. The sides, however, have seen a lot more wear and tear. A hole surrounded by a faint circle on the back of the guitar indicates that a strap button had once been fitted. I suspect this must have been done very early in the guitar's ↔

Purchased in LA, the Les Paul was used by Keith on *Exile On Main St* and on the Stones' 1972 American tour, and later by Mick Taylor up to the early '80s

Though outwardly original-looking, this Les Paul hides some secrets


Jumbo frets were likely installed during Mick Taylor's ownership


The butt displays the distinctive footprint of a Bigsby vibrato

history, as photos of Keith or Mick do not show them using it. Some distinctive holes at the tailpiece on the left and right sides indicate that a Bigsby vibrato was once fitted.

The nut

The nut is 43mm wide, and at some time in the past it has been replaced and not cut very well, as the D string slot is too close to the A string and the top E slot is too close to the edge of the fingerboard. The slot depth for all the strings isn't too bad but the back of the nut could have been dressed a little better so as not to impinge on the movement of the string as it leaves the back. As much as this could easily be corrected, I can understand the owner wanting to keep this guitar in the same condition as when it was purchased – and just as it was when Mick Taylor used it.

Neck

The neck is very comfortable to play, fitting around the thumb very nicely. Typically of '59 Les Pauls, it has a small heel (most early '58s were larger). Again, the neck shows very few signs of damage: I've seen '70s Les Pauls in much worse shape (there are also signs that the neck has been refinished at some stage, but more on this point later).

There is quite a bit of damage on the binding on the bass side of the first four frets, and it's been replaced with binding that is whiter than the original cream; it looks as if the newer binding has been on quite a few years, though, as it's beginning to age a little. The crown inlays are in good condition with no sign of damage or cracking. The fingerboard has started to wear around the second fret area, particularly under the G string and the E string, and there's also wear at the third fret under the B string – clearly a case of 'D-majoritis'! Taking into account all those classic songs played in this area, it's actually not as bad as some I've seen. The frets are the jumbo type but obviously done some time before the guitar was sold to the current owner, as there is very little wear on them, even considering the owner has had the guitar for 30 years. The refret is not great and could do with a bit of TLC, especially on the third fret that has popped up a little and catches the top E string on vibrato.

Headstock

The headstock has lost its 'Les Paul' script and has also had a clear lacquer overspray, but the black underneath is original; all the scratches and marks are underneath the clear lacquer, so we know it hasn't had a total refinish. Machineheads are Grovers, but there is another set of tuners in the case that early pictures of the guitar indicate were on first. Originally, though, this guitar would have had Klusons with a single ring on the plastic tulip buttons, and you can see the holes on the

headstock where they would have been.

Curiously, the serial number has been scratched on as it was lost due to sanding when the neck had an overspray. The original number would have been ink-stamped, and the current number – 8R1652 – doesn't make much sense. The second digit has been made to look like a letter 'R', and the first looks like a badly scratched '8'. There shouldn't be six characters in this serial number, because although in late '59 and early '60 Gibson did fill the gap between the year and the remaining four digits as their high production at this time did reach 9999, I've never heard of an original Les Paul from '59 with a six-digit serial number (although other models had them, and in 1960 Les Pauls did appear with six digits beginning with a zero).

So what's happened? It's unlikely that this guitar is a '58 Les Paul because it has a double-cream PAF at the bridge, and these were more common towards late '59. I'm making a huge assumption, I know, but indulge me for a minute. Is it possible that before the guitar had a refinish on the neck, the curling tail of the original ink-stamped '9' prefix in the serial number was mistaken for an 8. It's possible, on a guitar with scratches and wear marks. With regard to the 'R', before the refinish the number could have been written down and, post-spraying, mistakenly etched on, with the gap filled with an 'R' for identification/fun to imply 'Richards'.

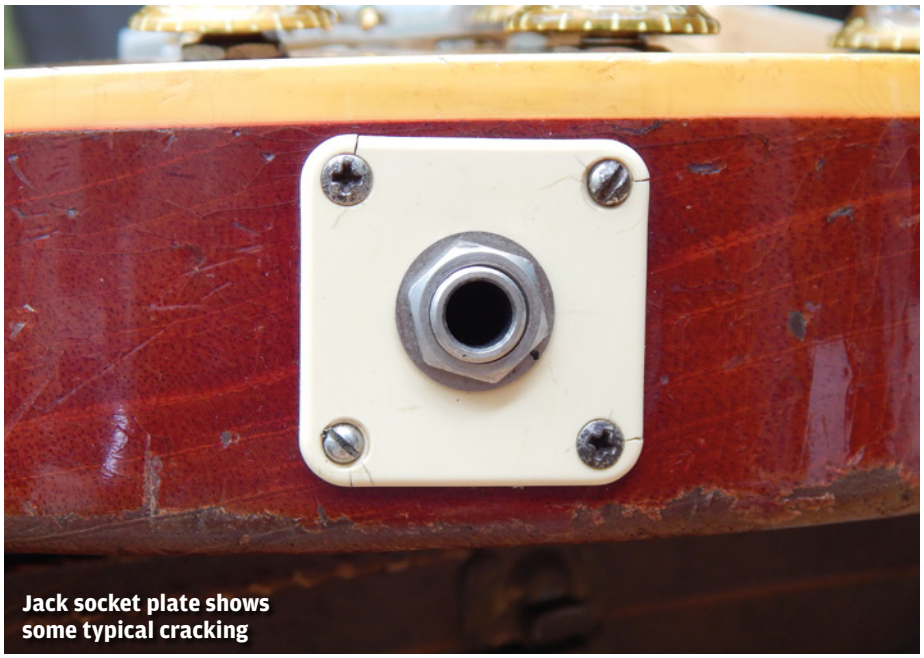
Why make any effort to reinstate the number when leaving it blank is acceptable, as you see on many unfinished guitars? It doesn't make any sense to make the attempt without making a point. After searching many sites, books and Gibson's own factory ledgers (or what was left after the fire), I can confirm that a Les Paul left Gibson's Kalamazoo factory with a serial number 9 1652 – and I can also confirm that there is no such Gibson serial number as 8R1652. Conjecture, sure... but interesting.

The Bigsby holes would also help indicate that this guitar is a '59, as Bigsbys were not fitted to Les Pauls during '58. Some people with '58s may have had a Bigsby fitted later, but I don't think that is the case here. The Bigsbys were factory-fitted at extra cost and were nickel-plated or brushed aluminium B7 models, and many of them were removed because of tuning problems.

Potentiometers

Looking inside you can see some splashes of red dye from where the guitar would have had a stain put over the grain filler. The wiring seems quite neat except for the bridge volume pot, which is a little untidy compared to the rest: the solder is generous.

Pots, of course, can help with dating a guitar, especially when there's a lack of a serial number, as long as the information ↦

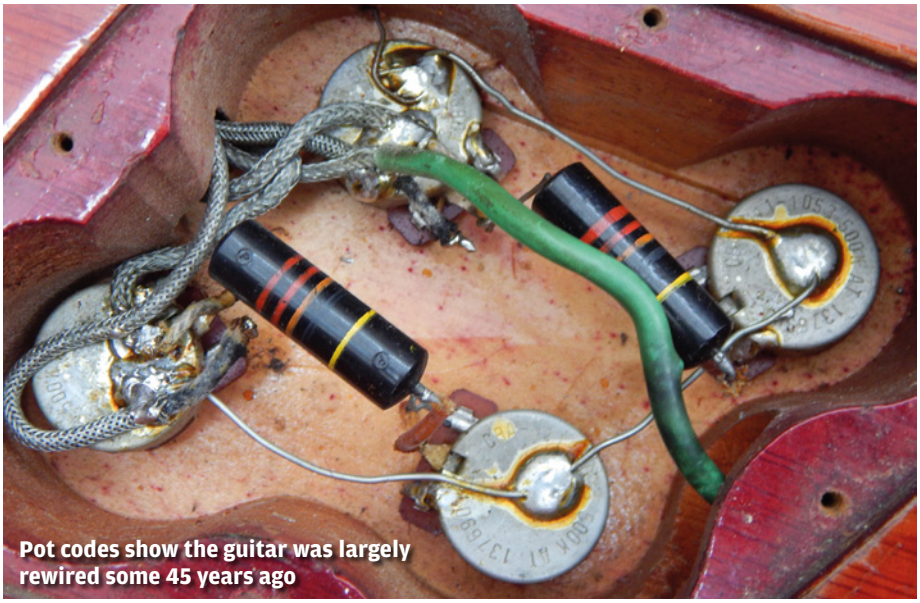


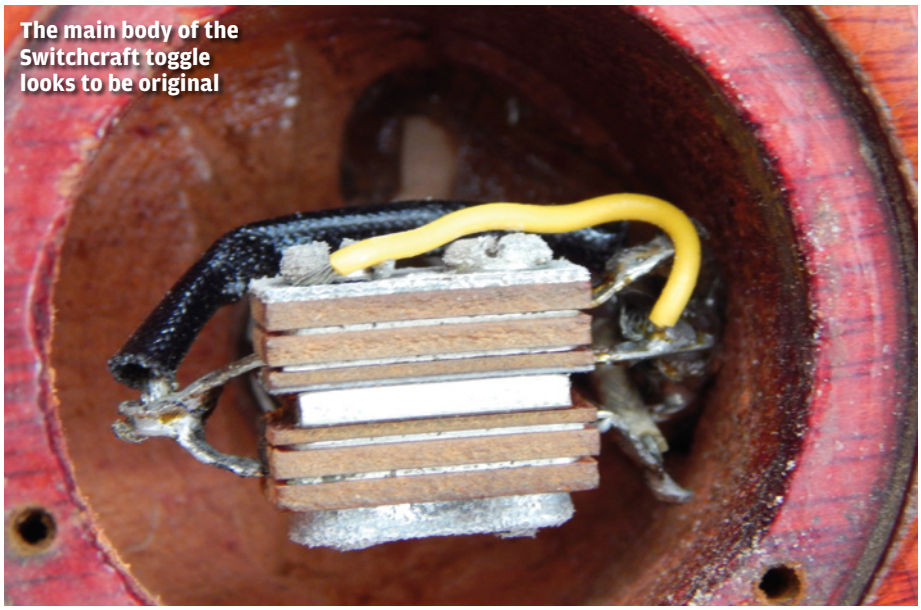
Jack socket plate shows some typical cracking

Oversprayed headstock but with the original black holly veneer

The Les Paul currently carries Grover machineheads; before that, it wore these Schallers

Original gold knobs show the typical greenish discolouration


Pot codes show the guitar was largely rewired some 45 years ago


The main body of the Switchcraft toggle looks to be original

is taken into account with other factors such as colour and period-correct hardware. On all these pots, the manufacturer's code is visible: it's 137, which means they were made by CTS (Chicago Telephone Service). The next digits are 690, and when I carefully used my finger to remove some grime I find a number '1' making the complete serial number 1376901, which give a date of the first week in January, 1969. This speaks volumes, because now we know that around this time – or even in 1970 – that this guitar had all the pots changed, as they all code to the same date.

This is fascinating, but we are not judging this guitar on its originality; for me, it's more about the personalities that played it. The bumble bee capacitors are period-correct and neatly soldered, and also in the case is the original jack socket which, amazingly, still works. All the pots work fine with just a tiny bit of scratchiness from the tone pots, often because they don't get as much use.

Bridge

The guitar has a non-original ABR1 Tun-O-Matic bridge, plus another no-name bridge in the case, and the bridge adjustment wheels are gold-plated as opposed to the nickel that you would expect. Interestingly, both have retaining clips that shouldn't be there. Also in the case was a spare tailpiece, non-original too. Other goodies in the case was a toggle switch cap that looks like it could be the original one along with a set of Grover replica-type machineheads. How fantastic to have such historical parts from such a well-photographed guitar.

Tailpiece

The tailpiece fitted on the guitar is non-original too, although nickel-plated. The studs which anchor it down are clearly chrome and would not be original either. Let's not forget, we are talking of a workhorse of a guitar for the Rolling Stones, and if something didn't look right to the eye – maybe like corrosion – they had a plentiful selection of other guitars to pick and choose new parts from.

Finish

Well, what can you say about a guitar that both Keith Richards and Mick Taylor played when touring and recording, especially the latter part of *Exile On Main St* and the 1972 American tour. Although both guitarists used this guitar, the original finish is in surprisingly overall good condition. The typical checking you get on a guitar of this age is evident on the top of the maple and especially around the treble pot. Unbelievably, the upper part of the guitar has not worn through the lacquer where the arm would rest and has retained its colour which has faded to a lovely shade of golden amber, except for the red near the toggle switch area and cutaway.

Under the scratchplate you can see just how much of the original red still remains.

No attempt has been made to fill the holes left by the Bigsby, which is sometimes a blessing as trying to match the colour to the original is not something you should do without knowing what happens to wood: if you get the stain wrong you have to start again. I've seen holes filled on a mahogany guitar that has a red finish in the past and the wood used (often cheap cocktail stick wood) turns pink when the lacquer is applied: not a good look at all!

Pickups

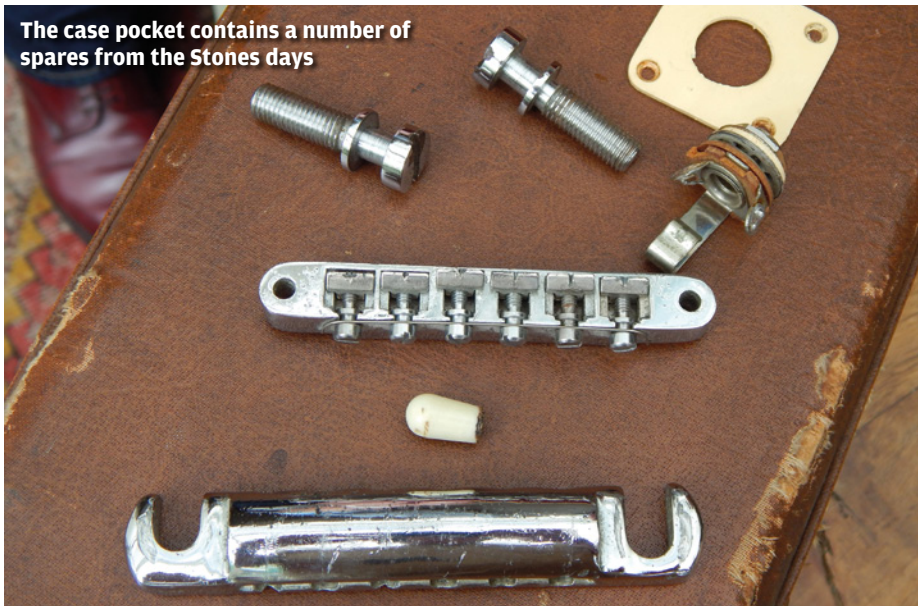
The owner told me before my trusted screwdrivers came out that the covers on the guitar had already been de-soldered on the back. The cans were just squeezed over the bobbins for easy removal to see what was underneath. I started with the bridge pickup, removing the very aged and dirty screws to see inside this time capsule and as soon as the last screw came out I carefully lifted the pickup out, realising that what I'd thought were nickel covers were actually gold-plated underneath. This throws up the possibility that even before Keith had the guitar, it may have had the cans removed; it's known that Clapton and others removed them around 1968, and people became interested in doing the same. It would seem they were put back on, though, either before or when Keith Richards purchased it, because early photos of the guitar show them in place. The toggle switch nut assembly beneath the plastic tip is also gold-plated, and much the worse for wear.

Carefully lifting the pickup cover exposed double cream bobbins, a classic sign that this guitar is from late '59, as around that time the black carbon pigment used in the manufacturing process temporarily started to run out. Around serial number 9-1000 to 9-1100, zebra and double creams were more common. The pickup resistance is 8.27 ohms. The classic 'Patent Applied For' (PAF) sticker is there underneath the pickup , and the black tape wrapped around the bobbins is nice and tight. Looking inside the cavity you can now see the half-inch maple cap that gets thinner towards the edge of the guitar: the total thickness is around 2.25". The pickup surrounds are period-correct and, although very dirty, have legible M-69 markings.

Having placed the pickup back it was now time to take a look at the neck pickup. Again, carefully lifting this out, I could see once more what first looks like a nickel cover is actually another gold-plated one. The polepiece adjustment screws are very dull and dirty, but it definitely has gold plating around the edges – unlike the bridge pickup, which does not. The other noticeable difference is the absence of the famous PAF sticker, which may have been lost at a time when somebody has ↔

Sprague Black Beauty or 'bumble bee' caps are present and correct

Bridge and tailpiece are both replacements


The case pocket contains a number of spares from the Stones days

Removing the pickups: the covers themselves are replacements

The bridge pickup revealed, a double cream bobbin unit

Inside the neck pickup cavity

handled the pickup.

This time after removing the cover we find double black coils with lots of dirt and corrosion around the polepieces. The magnet is long and one of the bobbins has a small square within a circle, indicating that this is actually a period PAF. In 1961 it changed to a short magnet for the whole production of pickups at that time. The braided wire coming out of this has a blob of solder and a bit of clear tape around it suggesting it had been cut when the pickup was replaced: the pickup measures 7.49 ohms. The spacing on the polepieces indicates the pickup has probably come off a jazz-type guitar such as an ES-355, ES-345 or a Byrdland. Keith Richards did use a '59 ES-355 in 1969 and although generally black Les Paul Customs all had the same pickup spacing, I've seen two '57 Customs with jazz guitar front pickup spacing.

Both Mick Taylor and Keith Richards used three-pickup Customs; Keith had four at one time. Is it possible that they were serviced at the same time as this Standard, and parts were swapped about? It would explain the gold in the front and rear pickup cans, bridge thumbwheels and toggle nut... who knows.

Inside the cavity, the neck tenon is now clearly visible and everything is cut nicely, which is testament to the people at Gibson who built this guitar with loving care; it is extremely rare for one of these joints to ever fail. Looking closer at this pickup, we can see a normal neck-spaced PAF with tooling marks where the normally-spaced polepieces would be. I think that on the evidence here, this pickup is from the period of 1957, as there was no PAF sticker used at this time.

Checking the toggle switch cavity at the back reveals a Switchcraft with white powdery deposits along the top edge; the condition doesn't affect the performance, it's really just where a micro-climate has existed over the years. Looking deeper into the cavity, there's some chipping away of the maple at the bottom where the switch comes through. The switch is nickel in colour all over; it's only on the outside that the threaded nut is gold.

Sound

Plugging into an original Marshall Bluesbreaker combo, I set the amp not too loud and relatively clean and flicked to the bridge pickup first. Considering the strings aren't new, there is an immediate well-balanced sound with a beautiful harmonic midrange that seems to fade in as the chord dies away. The treble frequencies are all there without the harshness or spike you can sometimes get when you hit hard. Listening to an F chord, the bottom E string isn't swamping the rest of the strings (although the owner did allow me to tweak the polepieces to enhance everything). This is a beautiful sounding pickup, and one that again proves

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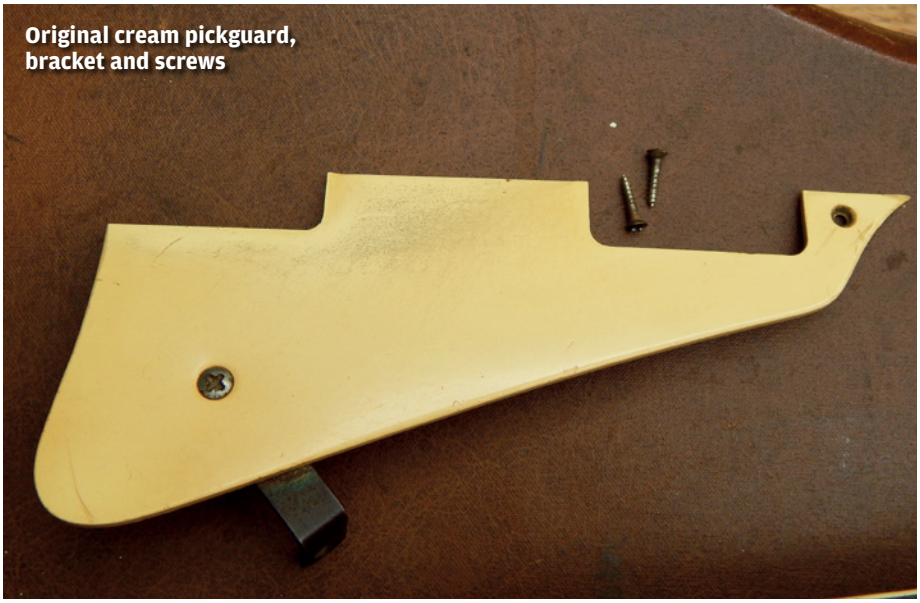
The neck pickup is from the right period but is almost certainly not from a Les Paul model



Original cream pickguard, bracket and screws

that hot overwound pickups are not the place to be in the search for tone.

Putting the toggle in the middle position activates both pickups. Because the front pickup is slightly lower in output, and very likely a '57 PAF, there is not the overwhelmingly thick rhythm sound you would expect. Instead the notes become very defined, almost as if you have just boosted the frequency of each string without it being too muddy: I really like this. It's such an expressive tone – not one I personally would tend to use much on a Les Paul, but with this kind of balance, I would. The middle position on this guitar also gives the subtle sound you can achieve when you back off either volume and bring in more or less of either pickup.

Flicking over to the neck pickup reveals another surprise; my anticipation of huge bass and lots of low mid was not that evident. This is no bad thing, because it still has enough guts and low end without having to lower it in its surround to achieve balance between the two. I'm not a big fan of pickups that sound like they are on steroids when you use the toggle; yes, there's room for that type of pickup on other guitars for certain music, but you don't want that power on a classic Les Paul. Whoever changed this pickup wanted a certain voice to suit their own playing style that the original did not have. It was common practice in the late '60s and early '70s to experiment with pickups, as there was nothing like today's range of floor pedals to boost or tame your sound.

Summary

I am reminded of the classic guitar sounds which made me want to spend hours listening to riffs and trying to get closer to that uncluttered vibe where you could hear the communication between player, guitar and amp – the connection that somehow became processed with the shift to digital. People like Peter Green, Gary Moore and Joe Bonamassa have all allowed the expression of what they feel to translate through the guitar first, and although the effects we use today are fantastic and give us more creative choice, there's nothing like the simplicity of the sound of guitar, amp and reverb. This guitar can be heard to great effect on *Exile On Main St* and with Mick Taylor, playing some brilliant licks with the Rolling Stones live. It is rare to see a guitar of this calibre and pedigree these days, so to have the chance to get up close to this instrument has been a pleasure and privilege. I would like to thank the owner for his patience and help and for allowing us access to the heart of this guitar.

Steve Clarke of Famous Frets is an experienced guitar tech and repairer and can be contacted via email at stacmusic@yahoo.co.uk.

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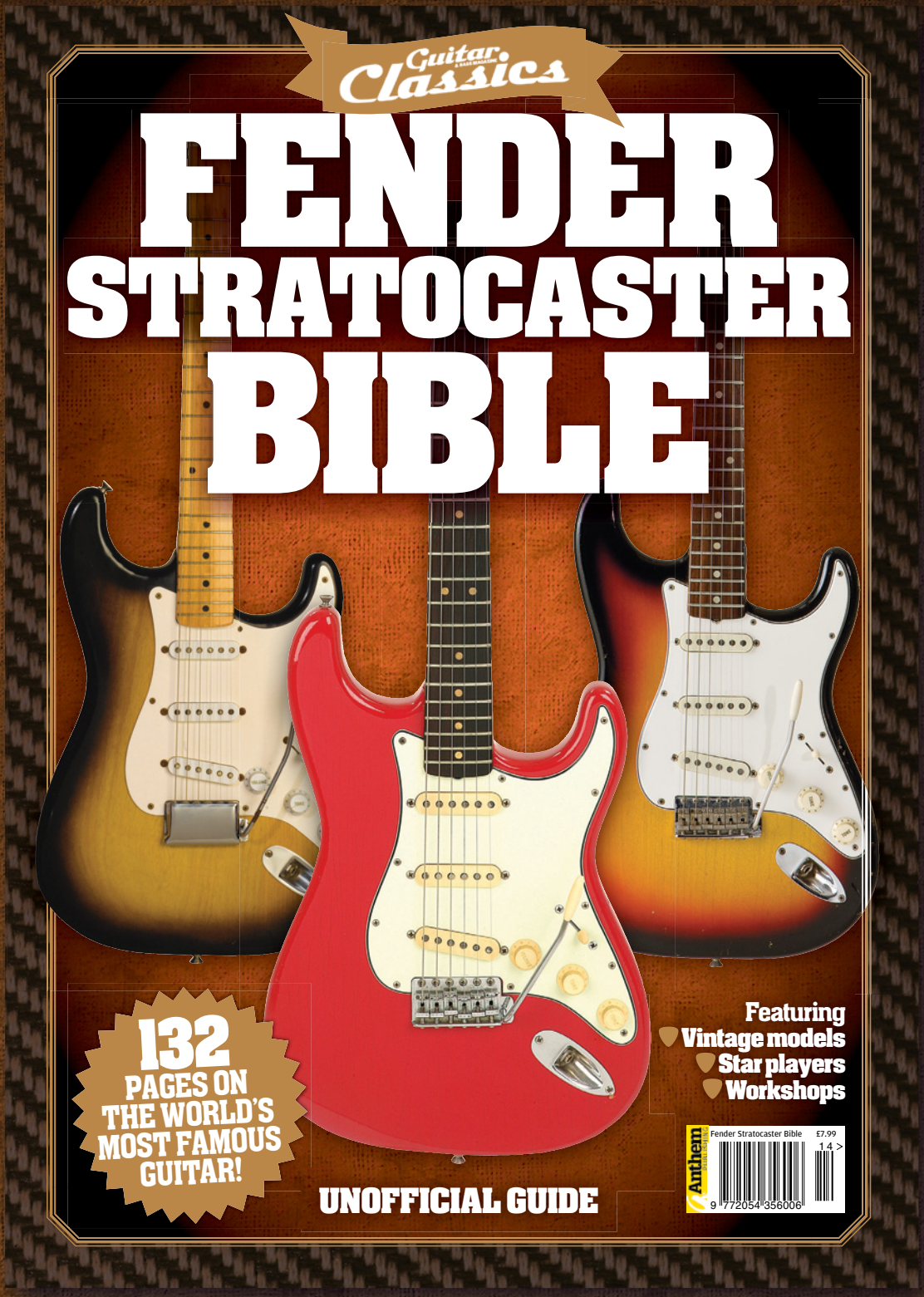

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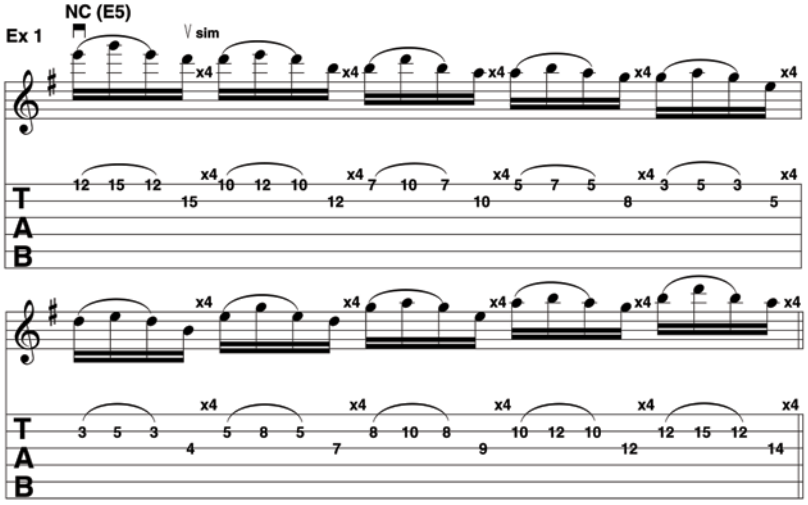
Last month's *Drills For Thrills* involved a couple of variations using five positions of the E pentatonic minor scale. This month's instalment involves the same basic lick and positions of the E pentatonic minor scale, but instead of working across the fretboard we're going to work down and up the fretboard – but even if you missed the previous workshop, you still should be able to pick up the thread okay. The following exercises should be linked together as a continuous sequence. However, they are best practised individually. Start slowly, build up speed, and use whichever fretting hand fingering you are most comfortable with.

1 DOWN AND UP AGAIN

4/4 TIME

We're starting with the first position E pentatonic minor scale at the 12th fret and the standard rock lick of plucking a note on the top string, hammering-on to the note above it, pulling-off to the original note, followed by plucking the next lower note in the scale on the second string. After playing this four times (indicated by 'x4'), we descend to the next lower position of the scale, which is the fifth position E pentatonic minor pattern, and play the same type of phrase. We continue working down the fretboard, using a different position of the scale each time for the first line, then for line two we move onto strings two and three and use the same lick moving up the fretboard.

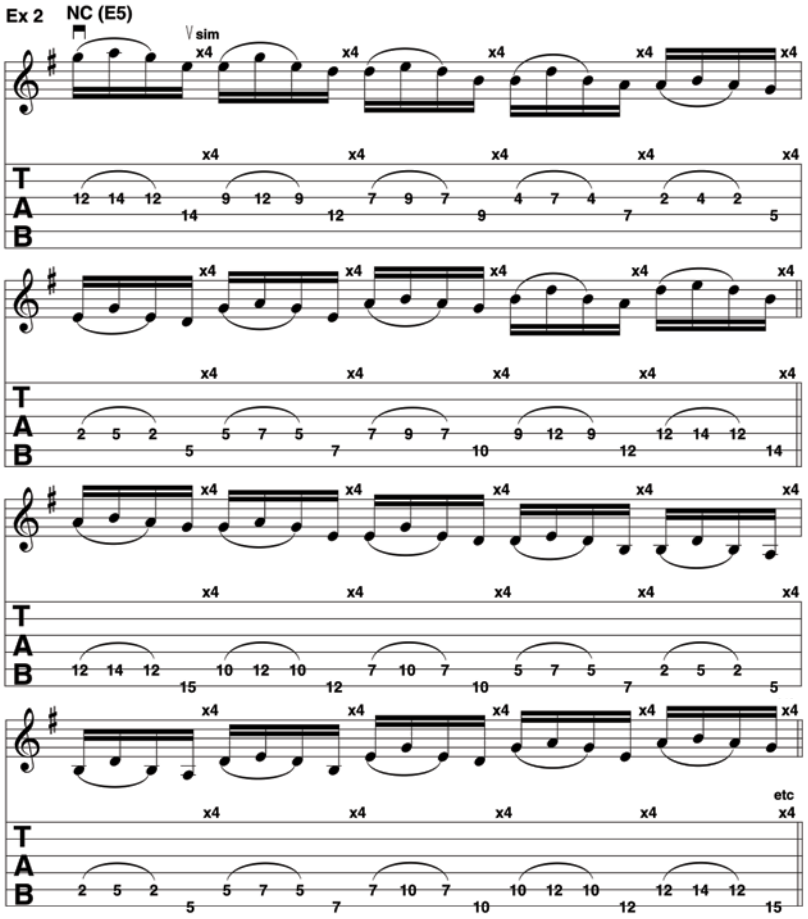


2 DOWN AND UP AGAIN PART 2

4/4 TIME

Intended to follow on from where Exercise 1 left off, the first two staves of this exercise work down the fretboard on strings three and four, crosses strings at the bottom of the fretboard onto strings four and five, and then works back up the fretboard.

Following on from the first part after working down strings five and six there are obviously no lower strings to cross onto, so on the second two staves the pattern moves back up strings five and six. The 'etc' indicates that the pattern can be continued in a similar manner back towards the top two strings.



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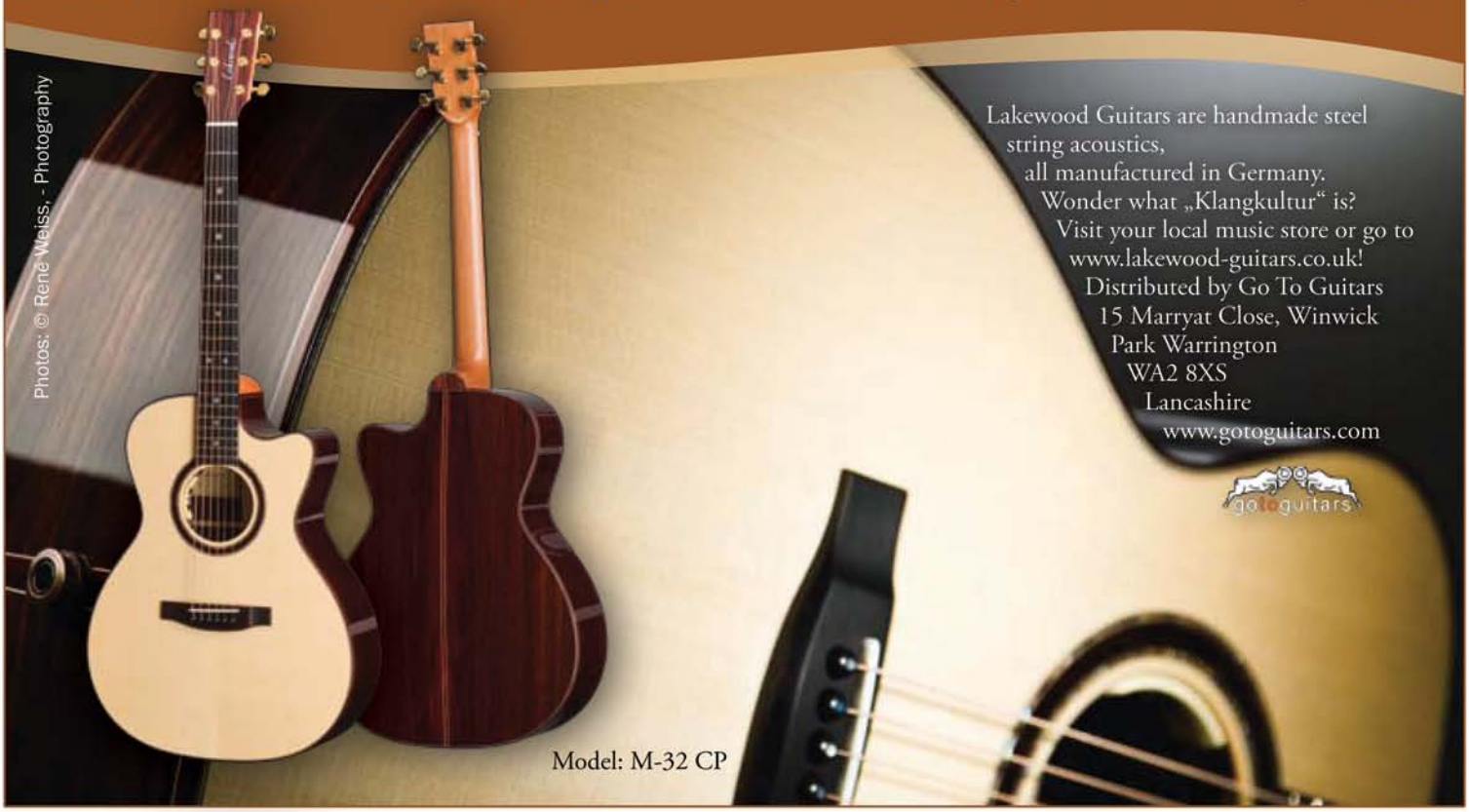

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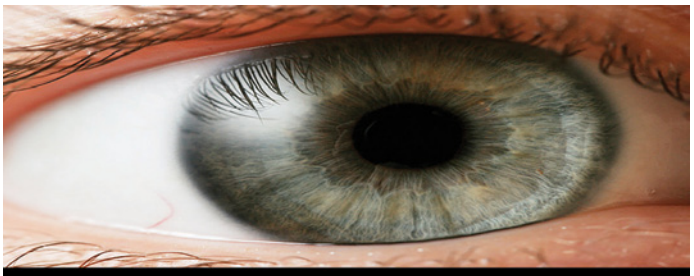

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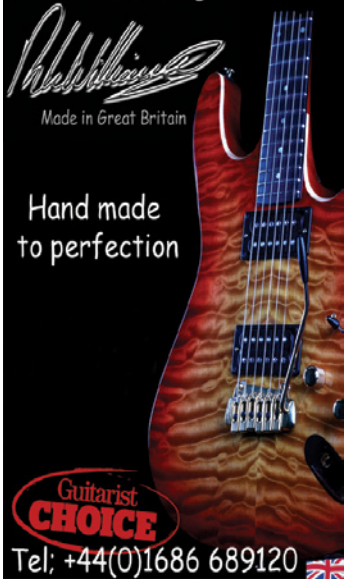

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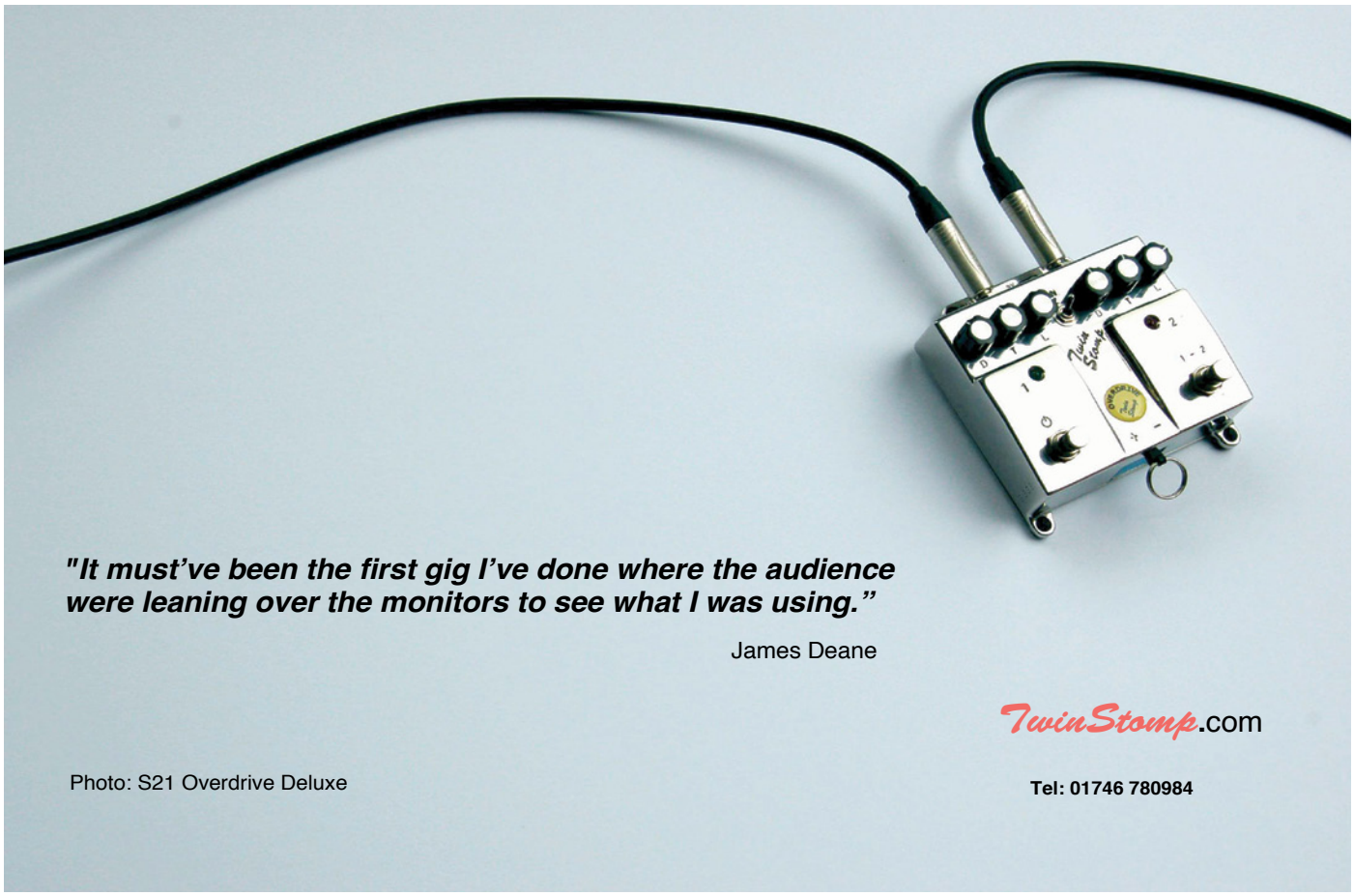

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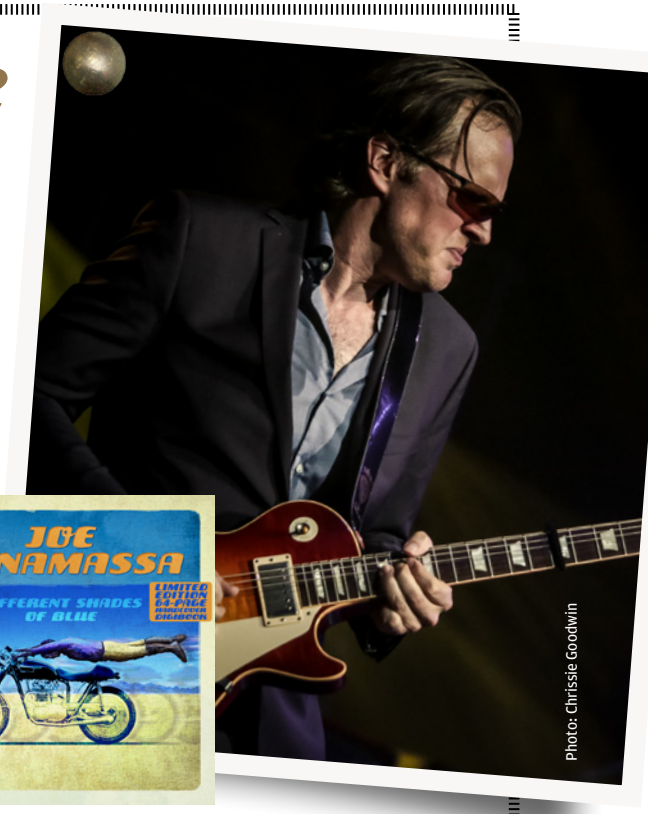
Expecting just blues? Joe's pick of country, jazz, folk rock and hardcore funk may surprise you

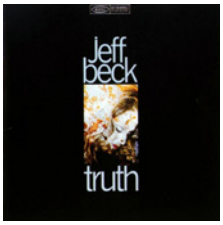


If Eric Clapton was to follow through on that recent threat to retire, there's no real debate raging about who currently occupies the position of understudy. Bonamassa has won hearts through sheer virtuosity backed by an almost inhuman work ethic. A self-confessed guitar nerd, he's an erudite font of all knowledge on guitars, vintage or otherwise, and a perpetual tonehound. Some still think of him as the young upstart yet he talks fondly of opening for ZZ Top with his band Bloodline a full 20 years ago, and September sees the release of his 11th solo studio album, *Different Shades Of Blue*. Holy grails from his incredible collection are wheeled out, and if anyone can draw the full frightening potential from a '59 Les Paul through a Dumble or Marshall Silver Jubilee, it's Bonamassa. The latest work sees Joe push back musical boundaries, revealing fresh vistas on a special talent.

Jeff Beck

TRUTH

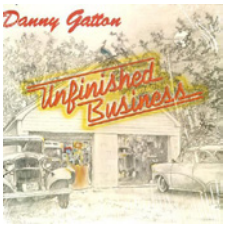
When I first heard this, I said that's what I want to be when I grow up. It was absolutely what took me down the path of Anglophile British blues, a Les Paul, a Marshall and all of that stuff. The sound is fantastic. It's so eclectic – there's a Yardbirds song, *Greensleeves, Morning Dew* – it's a fantastic big ol' soup.



Danny Gatton

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Later, I wanted to be a mini Danny Gatton. I had a Tele, Barden pickups and Fender Twins. He gave me this on vinyl the day I met him, and I wore it out. All my country chops came from this; he actually showed me how to play that stuff. He got me into vintage guitars and just being a guitar nerd... and I'm still that nerd.



Muddy Waters

HARD AGAIN

For me these are the definitive versions of Muddy's songs – all recorded live in the studio. This version of *Mannish Boy* was just raging, and you can hear Johnny Winter's voice doing the holler-back. I don't default to the originals; these just have so much fire and power, plus Johnny is killing it on guitar.

ZZ Top

TRES HOMBRES

This is just a perfect blues rock record. I love *Rhythmeen* too, from 1996 – that's heavy metal blues with a big, thick, rich tone, but *Waitin' For The Bus* and *Jesus Just Left Chicago*, man... it's hot, blue and righteous. Plus Billy can get the single greatest electric guitar sound I've ever heard through a PA.

Jethro Tull

THIS WAS

The first and only with Mick Abraham on guitar. I love Martin Barre too, but on here they come out blazing. I mean, progressive music fronted by a guy who looks like he's straight outta the baroque era and plays the lead flute? But it works. Mick's tone only has minimal overdrive, and it's so warm. I just love it, and still play it.

Rod Stewart

THE ROD STEWART ALBUM

It does open with an ill-advised cover of *Street Fightin' Man,* but the second track is the greatest version of *Man Of Constant Sorrow* I've ever heard. Ronnie Wood is on guitar, there's *Cindy's Lament* and *Blind Prayer* – they pretty much pick up where the Jeff Beck Group left off. It's that same kind of swagger.

James Brown

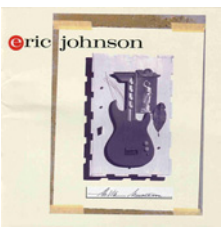
I GOT THE FEELIN'

You will not find a funkier band than the one on this album. I particularly like the title track because it sounds like one guitar, but it's actually two, and they work it out almost militantly in the studio. One guy does the upstroke and the other does the downstroke, so its like this push-pull thing. Fantastic arranging.

Eric Johnson

AH VIA MUSICOM

Fast players get a bad rap. People say shredders all have the same sound, there's no songs and no soul. Eric proved them wrong! Perfect sound, great songs and real soul. This was the '80s when it was all pointy headstocks; he had a '54 Strat, a couple of Twins, a Superlead and a Tubedriver... and he just killed everybody.



Miles Davis

WE WANT MILES

This is a live album recorded at The Channel in Boston. Now there's no romance about that gig, it was just a hole with a stage, but this sounds like it was recorded in the Stravinski Hall in Montreux! It's funky, it's hip, Marcus Miller keeps everyone on point, and I don't think Mike Stern has ever played better.

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